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SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

ISSUE 202

F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre
SUNDOWNER SHEILA

OTHER NEW STORIES

Richard Calder
Gareth Lyn Powell
Jack Mangan
Carlos Hernandez

NEW THIS ISSUE

ALAN FRASER
Gamezone
SARAH ASH
Mangazone

DAVID LANGFORD'S ANSIBLE LINK
JOHN CLUTE'S SCORES
NICK LOWE'S MUTANT POPCORN

GERRY ANDERSON

ON CGI, CAPTAIN SCARLET & A
MILLION POUNDS AN EPISODE

ON DISCWORLD, BREAKING AMERICA & BEEKEEPING

TERRY PRATCHETT

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The Results

- Negative votes were subtracted from positive votes, resulting in an overall score for stories from issues 194–200, which are listed here from winner down. Congratulations to Dominic Green!

- The Clockwork Atom Bomb** (198)
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Additional Comments From Readers

Paul S. Jenkins: The new look is great. The Jim Burns cover of issue 199 was, well, surprising – but it certainly grabbed the attention. The whole feel of the new *Interzone* is one of high quality. It's taken a while to bed in, find its new feet or whatever, but IZ is now a very fine product.

I've reviewed the fiction in all of the new issues up to 197 on my podcast, *The Rev Up Review*, and will eventually catch up to the latest. You can hear the show at www.revupreview.co.uk (broadband recommended).

Nigel Leyland: On the whole, issue 196 was probably one of the best issues of any magazine I've ever bought. Perhaps even 'The Face of America' only stood out like a sore thumb because I enjoyed the rest of it so much.

Piet Wenings: All other stories were likable, but didn't excite me enough. I guess this

makes Jeremiah Tolbert my favourite *Interzone* contributor. It's also good to see that I liked more stories than I didn't like. That means *Interzone* is still doing it for me.

Rob Butler: In general I think the last few issues of the 'old' *Interzone* mostly had stories that were a good read without being either outstanding or poor. Since TTA has taken over I've found much more variety in the standard, but, unfortunately, from my own viewpoint, rather more that I consider poor. All subjective of course but it's a lot more unpredictable which is always interesting. Keep it going!

Chris Geeson: Fabulous stuff, keep up the good work!

Caroline Stickland: It's always a pleasure to see my copy of your magazine arrive.

D. Clark: Other things:

Ansible Link – great, keep it up;
author interviews – less of them please;
new headings (Intermission, Interface, Interlocutions etc) – pretentious rubbish that annoy me every time I see them, get rid of them.

Duncan: Although a number of correspondents have suggested the old *Interzone* was looking tired, I did not see it myself. I'm in it for the stories, not the look, and was perfectly happy that I was getting good quality fiction in an easily readable format. In addition, I have also been gradually working my way through the back issues, so comparing the look of issue 40 with that of issue 180, the latter always looked fresher and lighter. Nevertheless, it was getting a bit disconcerting when publishing started to stutter and it looked as if *Interzone* might disappear into publishing history. Over the years, I've also watched how TTA – and TTA Press – has grown, and was immediately hopeful that the new management would nurture the most important SF magazine in Europe.

I am so pleased with the new *Interzone*! Looking through the little stack of new issues, it's clearly been a learning experience for TTA Press – and for some of us stuck in the mud readers. Issue 194 was a big statement. It was very exciting to look at, but the subsequent increased subtlety

READERS' POLL RESULTS

in page design has certainly improved readability. The arrival of internal colour and banner title has made the magazine look like it will sit comfortably on the supermarket shelf.

Even so, *Interzone* still has to be about the text, and I'm glad that the Readers' Poll lives on. I'm also pleasantly surprised at how many good stories I've seen. The only real failure was 'The Face of America' by David Ira Cleary. It was a perfect example of the kind of thing IZ used to publish a very long time ago – vague and pointless.

Against this one negative vote, I have nine positive votes to offer. In publication order, they are:

'Enlightenment' by Douglas Smith. I guess the title gives the end away, but the story was well constructed and well written. I enjoyed it enough to seek out Smith's other story in this universe ('Scream Angel') online.

'Dreams of the White City' by Jay Lake built up nicely – no doubt assisted by the sympathetic illustrations – with enough mysticism to flavour the story without overwhelming it.

'When you Visit the Magoebaskloof Hotel be Certain not to Miss the Samango Monkeys' by Elizabeth Bear was absolutely brilliant. It's a great example of telling one idea very well, and manages a great depth of emotion in its short span as well.

'Totems' by Will McIntosh also managed a depth of emotion, in a tale cleverly built on its characters as well as the gradually revelation of the central idea.

'Piccadilly Circus' by Chris Beckett was up to the standard I've come to expect from Beckett, an interesting idea set in a dark and decaying London – except it's not.

'Go Tell the Phoenicians' by Matthew Hughes evoked all the old SF clichés of human traders and explorers to great effect, playing some straight and subverting others whilst also seeming to come up with a wholly new idea for aliens.

'The Clockwork Bomb' by Dominic Green is the kind of story I would like to

see more of, with its sharp humour and the hard physics ideas. It is all the more interesting for being exotic in setting without having to go further than Africa.

'Bird Songs at Eventide' by Nina Allan, in comparison with the previous two, is quiet, nearly still but just as strong, as it evokes the all too human perils of prior assumptions.

'Thinking the Unthinkable About Ronald Reagan by Lester Bangs' by Edward Morris was just the kind of story I usually hate. It is clichéd alternative history and pointless what-iffery, but the sparky, spiky style and outrageousness of the conception pulls it into an entertaining piece of hackery.

That adds up to better than one great story for every issue – and a pretty even distribution of good stories too. I'm looking forward to the ongoing style revolution in IZ, confident that the story quality is meeting the high bar of the magazine's long history.

James Higgott: I've been getting IZ for a few years now and have welcomed the change in ownership. Don't get me wrong – David Pringle did a fantastic job, but it's much nicer to have something a little more professional-looking in your hands, especially when trying to convince friends that you're reading something decent. The fiction and artwork are as good (and bad) as ever. The reviews, comment, etc have improved if anything (getting Rick Kleffel and John Clute was a good move) and the design and layout are immeasurably better. All power to you.

My only gripe is the choice of 'Intermission' for the title of the magazine's fiction section. Interview, Interface and even Interlocutions all make sense but Intermission just makes the idea look stretched. It may as well be called Interval. Why not Interflow, Interlinear, Interlingua, Interlibrary (a real word!) or Interoceptive?

Having got that off my chest, please do keep up the good work. You can certainly rely on my subscription for some time to come.

Philip Eagle: Positive votes:

'Bastogne v.9': Topical SF as it should be done, with excellent writing and characterisation that serves the powerful central concept.

'The Court of the Beast Emperor': Again, a fine concept, very well-handled. On the evidence of this and 'Third Day Lights', which just failed to make it here, you should do more of these fantasy stories.

'Piccadilly Circus': The antecedents of this one are very recognisable, but it's better than those antecedents by a mile. Excellent consideration of the social effects of technological change.

'Redemption, Drawing Near': Very alien but still sympathetic aliens, hints of optimism against a dark background, an intriguing linguistic idea, and a central character who very few SF stories would treat with such understanding.

'This, My Body': Again, a remarkable intellectual concept thought through in powerfully emotional terms.

Negative votes:

'Enlightenment': A story designed to show that politically sensitive tales in which unspeakably vile human cultures invade saintly alien ones and put them to the sword can be just as clichéd and smug as the tentacled-menace stories they react against.

'Winning Mars'/ 'Saving Mars': Please, please, please, no more Jason Stoddard. I know there must be some changes with the new *Interzone* regime, but there's no way the magazine should ever be printing this sort of gee-whizz 'Samizdata' Libertarian autofellatio. It's unfortunate that the magazine arrived just as the people of the Deep South were learning what happens when you trust the entrepreneurs and the free market to save you from the evil, evil gubmint. Tell Stoddard to piss off and write advertorials for 'Tech Central Station'.

If you'd like to continue discussing the poll, or anything else, you're welcome to *Interzone's* online discussion forum at www.ttapress.com/discus. You do not need to register.

Christopher Priest won the French Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire (best foreign novel) for *The Separation*. The awards were presented at the Utopiales festival in Nantes on 11 November.

AS OTHERS SEE US

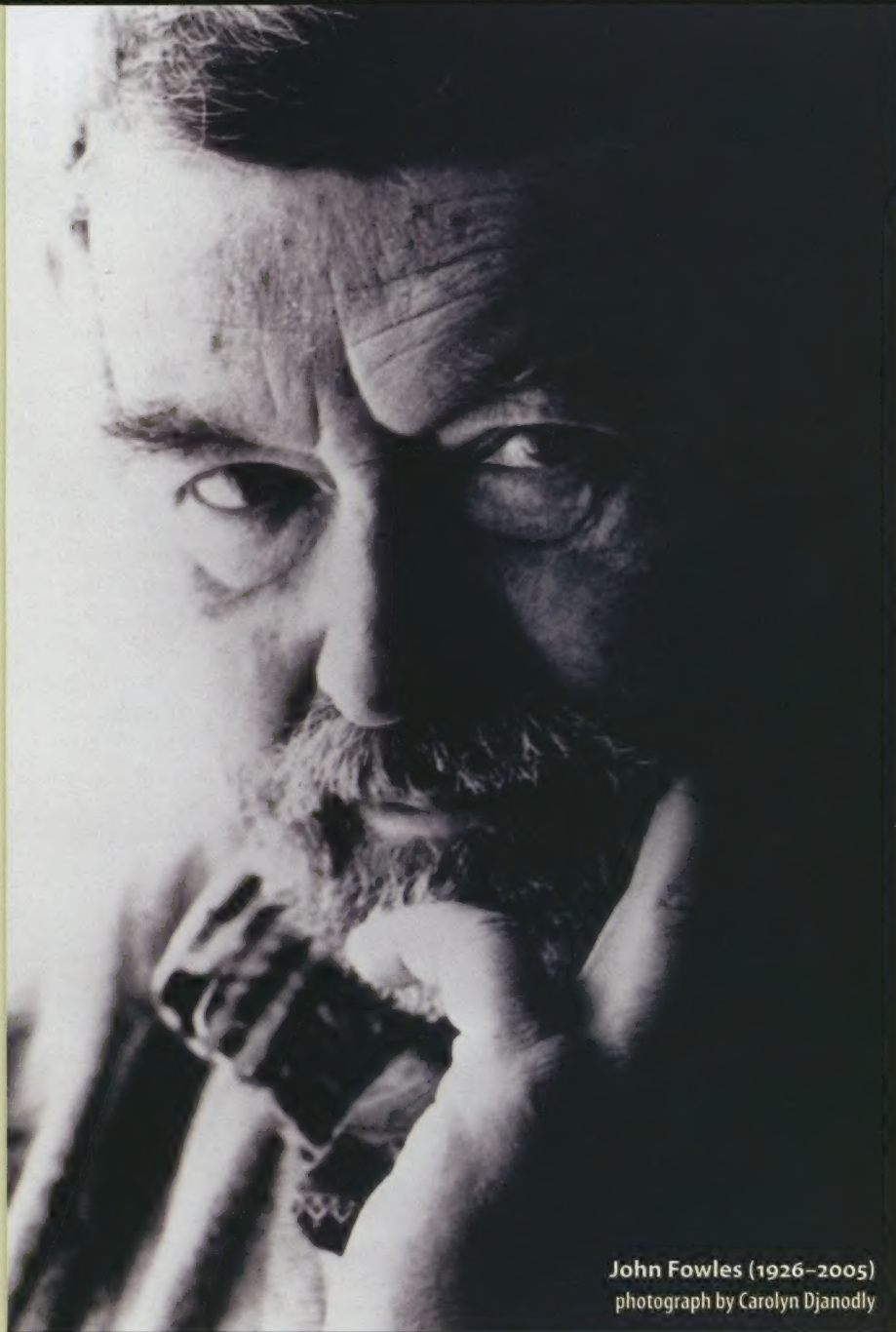
An *Observer* bioscience article's opening sentence works hard to chill the blood: 'It is a prospect worthy of a science fiction B-movie: male couples, women past the menopause, infertile couples and even celibate clergy producing their own children.' (13 Nov) Presumably the reporters saw a range of Thog-rated SF films that the rest of us missed: *Attack of the Fertilitoids*, perhaps, or the epically tacky struggle against alien oppressors in Ed Wood's *Planned Parenthood from Outer Space*.

Robert Conquest was one of fourteen who received the US Presidential Medal of Freedom on 9 November – not for his science fiction, nor for co-editing the *Spectrum* anthologies with Kingsley Amis, nor even for his unbelievably filthy verse sequel to 'Eskimo Nell', but for the detailed exposé of Soviet atrocities in *The Great Terror* and other historical works. His famous *Spectrum* epigraph has often been echoed here: 'SF's no good, they bellow till we're deaf. / But this looks good.' / 'Well then, it's not SF.'

Arthur C. Clarke received the Sri Lankan government's highest civilian honour, the Sri Lankabhimanya award, for 'his contributions to science and technology and his commitment to his adopted country.' (Reuters)

Anne Rice is still writing about immortal supernatural beings, but with a certain change of emphasis: her latest is a novel about the 7-year-old Jesus, narrated by Christ himself. "I promised," she says, "that from now on I would write only for the Lord." *Newsweek* headlined this as 'her most daring book yet' – though the Rice approach looks safely devout, and there seems little chance that the infant Christ will radiantly sink his teeth into deserving throats.

Geoff Ryman's SF novel *Air* won the 2005 Sunburst Award for best Canadian fantastic literature.



John Fowles (1926–2005)
photograph by Carolyn Djanodly

Thog's Blurb Masterclass, or how to praise massive books: a back cover quote from A.A. Attanasio warns that 'Ricardo Pinto's *The Chosen* strikes the reader with great force.'

World Fantasy Awards LIFE ACHIEVEMENT Tom Doherty; Carol Emshwiller. NOVEL Susanna Clarke, *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*. NOVELLA Michael Shea, 'The Growlimb' (*F&SF* 1/04). SHORT Margo Lanagan 'Singing My Sister Down' (*Black Juice*). ANTHOLOGY

(tie) Barbara & Christopher Roden, eds., *Acquainted With The Night*, Sheree R. Thomas, ed., *Dark Matter: Reading The Bones*. COLLECTION Margo Lanagan, *Black Juice*. ARTIST John Picacio. SPECIAL AWARD, PROFESSIONAL S.T. Joshi (scholarship). SPECIAL, NON-PROFESSIONAL Robert Morgan (Sarob Press).

Harlan Ellison & William F. Nolan will be honoured as SFWA Grand Master and Author Emeritus at the Nebula Awards in May 2007.

DAVID LANGFORD'S ANSIBLE LINK

Richard Calder received special mention in the *Guardian* celebration of *Interzone* 200: 'SF writers today, it seems, are content to look as geeky as ever they did in the 1980s. A photograph of the lead interviewee, Richard Calder, in which the author is captured bathed in red light and sporting glasses whose lenses could windscreen an Austin Maxi, screams "here is a man who had his lunch money pinched as a child"' (22 Oct)

AS OTHERS SEE US II

David Honigmann on 'Guilty Pleasures of Second-Rate Art' (*Financial Times*, 19 Oct): 'The essence of a guilty pleasure is that it is something you know to be flawed but love anyway. My list would include the Corrs, Vaughan Williams, immense quantities of science fiction, *A Matter of Life and Death*, and Stanley Spencer.' Perhaps modest quantities of science fiction are OK.

YET MORE AWARDS

Doctor Who won three of the **British National TV Awards** presented on 25 October: most popular drama, actor and actress. (BBC News)

The 2005 Ig Nobel Prizes include a splendid SF highlight, the Peace award presented 'for electrically

monitoring the activity of a brain cell in a locust while that locust was watching selected highlights from the movie *Star Wars*.'

The Truth At Last. Tilda Swinton, playing the White Witch in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, dispels those persistent rumours: 'This is not a religious film, but people will project onto it what they want to.' (*Independent*, 18 Nov) The lion and the wardrobe were unavailable for comment.

International Horror Guild awards include: NOVEL Ramsey Campbell, *The Overnight*. FIRST NOVEL John Harwood, *The Ghost Writer*. LONG FICTION Lucius Shepard, *Viator*. FILM *Shaun of the Dead*. TV *Lost*. ILLUSTRATED NARRATIVE Hideshi Hino, *The Bug Boy*. PERIODICAL *The Third Alternative*.

THOG'S MASTERCLASS

Words Fail Dept. 'Fast broadcast the nonverbal equivalent of a shrug.' (*Geodesica: Ascent*, Sean Williams & Shane Dix, 2005)

Dept of Born Politicians. 'Untruth was a violin which he played like a Paganini of bunkum.' (Marlon Brando and Donald Cammell, *Fan-Tan*, 2005)

Method Acting Dept. 'Leash drilled his eyes into Ramsey.' + 'May furrowed her brow. Her pupils jittered side to side, as if her frontal lobes were doing heavy lifting. Her gaze was so intense, it looked like her skull could blow up in a puff of hot steam at any moment. Then her face lit up with a divine epiphany.' (both Greg Vilk, *Golem*, 2005)

Terry Pratchett (left) savours another accolade: 'On Sunday morning on BBC1 yesterday Andrew Marr was kind enough to describe me as "following in the tradition of Philip Pullman and J.K. Rowling." And a fine tradition it is.' (28 Nov)



Terry Pratchett is interviewed on the following pages

R.I.P.

Teisho (aka Sadamasa) Arikawa (1925–2005), Japanese special effects director and cinematographer who worked on the original 1954 *Gojira/ Godzilla* film and many sequels, died on 22 September aged 80.

David Austin (1935–2005), UK cartoonist who often made wry, knowledgeable use of scientific and sf themes (I first met his work in *New Scientist*), died on 19 November aged 70.

Michael G. Coney (1932–2005), British-born SF author long resident in Canada, died from cancer on 4 November. After his diagnosis this year, he made various unpublished works freely available on his website (members.shaw.ca/mconey/). A talented, quirky and underrated author, he never had the success he deserved – apart from his 1977 BSFA Award for *Brontomek!*

John Fowles (1926–2005), celebrated UK novelist best known for *The Collector* (1963), *The Magus* (1965) and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), died on 5 November after a long illness. He was 79. His novels often touch on genre themes: paranoid-fantasy godgames in *The Magus*, erotic-comic grappling with a literal Muse in *Mantissa* (1982), and the unashamedly SF conceit at the core of the historical labyrinth in *A Maggot* (1985). A genuinely great writer.

Robert Sheckley (1928–2005), US author who was a pioneer of intelligently humorous and satirical SF, died on 9 December. He was 77. After surviving critical respiratory illness in April/May 2005 and heart surgery in June, he needed a further operation for a brain aneurism on 10 November and failed to recover. Sheckley entered the SF scene with a blizzard of 1950s and 1960s short stories that ranged from engaging nonsense, through clever gadgetry and twist endings worthy of Saki or O. Henry, to dark satires whose comedy verged on nihilism. In person he was genial, soft-spoken and unfailingly witty, a popular guest at SF conventions. Though his finest work appeared in decades when humour was sadly underrated, he received several honours from the SF community and was much loved.

TERRY PRATCHETT

Terry Pratchett, or Terryho

Pratchetta as they say in the Czech Republic, needs no introduction. His latest international bestselling Discworld opus is *Thud!* [reviewed by John Clute in issue 200]. Some of his other recent releases include the soon to be children's classic *Where's My Cow?* as well as the Johnny Maxwell Trilogy of *Only You Can Save Mankind*, *Johnny and the Dead* and *Johnny and the Bomb*.

There is also a fascinating collection of essays on Terry Pratchett and his work, edited by Andrew M. Butler, Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, entitled *Terry Pratchett: Guilty of Literature*, published by the Science Fiction Foundation in 2002 with contributions from David Langford, John Clute, Andy Sawyer and Cherith Baldry among others. The UK edition has sold out but a second edition, revised and expanded, was published by Old Earth Books in 2004: www.oldearthbooks.com. Pratchett has seldom been taken seriously by critics, even though some reviewers have, he says, accused him of literature.

With the publication of *Thud!* you finally cracked the New York Times top ten best sellers hardcover list. I believe it peaked at #4. Does it feel good to have finally accomplished that after all these years?

Good, of course, but I was happier for my editor and publicist. Six years or so ago I was barely an underground success in the US. Then new brooms came in at Harper and began to undo more than ten years of bad corporate decisions – I mean, *really* bad ones. But I knew things were getting better when I walked into a Barnes & Noble in the States and saw a shelf of my books. US bookshops don't stock books that don't sell.

The first shop where I signed on the recent US tour sold out, so I understand, of all my titles, so disappointed fans went to another bookshop nearby and stripped *that*, too. People said "Don't you feel proud of that?" and I was thinking: "Damn! People who come in tomorrow won't have anything to buy!"

What inspired you to write *Where's My Cow?* What I am getting at is, could there be an unconscious attempt by the bovine population to take over the world? The Seattle rock band Mudhoney released the record *My Brother The Cow*, mad cow disease has been running rampant for a few years now, *The Tao of Cow: What Cows Teach Us* by Dolly Mu was a recent best seller. I even found myself writing a cow-based short story for a fiction anthology called *The Holy Church of Moo – A Call to Cud*. What gives?

Dunno. *Where's My Cow?* got produced because my editor fell in love with the idea. It's a squib, a bit of fun, and a chance for Melvyn Grant to do some wonderful pictures. There's something intrinsically funny about cows.

With the modicum of success that *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* had at the box office, do you think a Discworld movie is closer to fruition; the *Good Omens* debacle and the Dreamworks project notwithstanding?

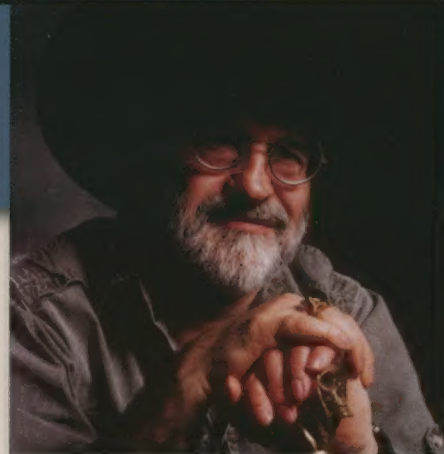
Even though there is in theory a production due to start shooting next year, I'm assuming that something will get in the way. Movies don't get made.

What would you say has been your most disappointing experience you've had, writing career wise?

There's never been a huge major downer, but I was disappointed that *Good Omens* did so badly in the World Fantasy Awards in 1991 – probably because it was funny. And that's about the level of things, really. Disappointments fade. Sales continue!

Looking back over your career, what was the most disappointing novel that you wrote? Which one makes you grab your head and mumble, "Why did I ever write that?"

Sourcery. I wrote it because the fans wanted another Rincewind novel. I didn't. I put the work into it and it stayed in the best seller



list for three months. Somehow, that made me uneasy.

Years ago I remember that you dabbled in beekeeping as a hobby. I have friends who own a rather lucrative honey farm in West Virginia. Is beekeeping something you still do? What attracted you to beekeeping?

Dabble? You can't *dabble* in beekeeping! I learned it from little old men, too, who gave me tips you don't find in books.

The attraction? It grounds you. You have to understand a rhythm you don't (mostly) control. You get lots of honey. And your neighbours positively *hope* your livestock grazes on their land!

I had to give it up because of Spring signing tours, in the middle of the busy season. I hope to go back to it in a couple of years.

Did you ever have a problem with your bees such as a big swarm of them getting loose and raiding small villages, attacking Vicars and the like?

No. Swarming bees are usually incredibly docile, at least for a few hours. The art of beekeeping is not to have problems.

I once interviewed Irish writer Robert Rankin and asked him if he would ever consider co-writing a book with you. He went on a bit of a tirade about how he doesn't work with anybody and wouldn't even entertain the idea. You wrote *Good Omens* with Neil Gaiman. At this point in your career, is there anyone else that you would really like to work with on a project?

You mean would I actively seek someone to

SHIPE HUNTING FOR STEWED TOMATOES

work with? No. *Good Omens* was a happy fluke: right guys, right project, right time. I doubt if something like that will happen again.

Your *Discworld* series began back in the 1980s and at the time was very much as a parody or send-up of sword & sorcery fantasy writings; a pseudo-medieval setting with wizards, barbarians, etc. But over the years, as your style developed and grew in sophistication, you started to satirize everything from religion to Hollywood to holidays to the military-industrial complex. How has your interpretation of *Discworld* changed and evolved over the years?

Er...shouldn't you ask a reader? I think I'm just writing them better.

I would like to thank Mr Pratchett for taking the time out of his busy schedule to answer a few questions. I went into the interview excited and hoping that it'd be much more comprehensive than it turned out, so I'd like to apologize to *Interzone* readers for that.

SUGGESTED LINKS

Terry Pratchett books:
www.terrypratchettbooks.com

The L-Space Web – a Terry Pratchett/
Discworld website:
www.lspace.org

Discworld MUD:
<http://discworld.imaginary.com:5678/>

The Bad Fads Museum:
www.badfads.com/home.html

The Science Fiction Foundation:
www.sf-foundation.org

GERRY ANDERSON ON CAPTAIN SCARLET



Much loved and looking sexier than ever, the new *Captain Scarlet* series has been a huge success. Beautifully crafted entirely in CGI, the twenty-six episodes cost a cool twenty-three million pounds and nearly didn't make it past the first two episodes.

While the public enjoys the shows, the ratings are being measured around the world and the merchandising profits calculated. It's a huge evaluation process to determine whether a further series will be cost effective. Understandably, it's also a nail-biting time for creator Gerry Anderson. So while he waits, **Sandy Auden** talks first to him and then to CGI Supervisor Richard Morris about the whole process... ►

INTERVIEW

INTERVIEW · GERRY ANDERSON (PAGE 8) & RICHARD MORRIS (PAGE 9) BY SANDY AUDEN

How did the new series get going, Gerry?

CGI is something that has grown up very rapidly over the last ten years. And I could see there was a possibility of remaking the show using all the same characters that everyone knew but bringing them to life as real people. All the original shows were made using marionettes and we ended up with those strange sort of puppet walks, and shots where a human hand had to be used to pick something up, but the fact is I'd always wanted the puppets to do more than it was possible for them to do. So I found CGI a very exciting proposition.

Before you could embark on the new series, were there legalities you need to sort out?

I made most of my old series for Lew Grade of Associated Television and he owned the rights. When he was deposed from the company, there was a scramble for the rights and the library containing all of my shows ended up belonging to Carlton Television. So I approached Carlton Television directly. They granted the remake rights and with them in hand we set up a studio and went into production.

I wanted to take the new series into the present year with attitudes and modern technology etc. Our attitudes to women were very different when we made the original series, and I decided that they should be treated equally in this series. Then we updated some of the hardware. Cloudbase was redesigned and renamed Skybase and we brought in lots of new vehicles. We wanted the show to look as if it was made with today's technology and looking into the future, instead of looking from thirty-five years ago into the future.

But we kept the principle characters because they're known world wide. I think people remember the characters by their faces and also by their dress, by their uniforms. So it was just a question of ensuring that the audience could connect up rapidly with the characters that they already knew. If we'd have done it as a live show with actors, it would've taken people some time to get used to an entirely different person as Captain Scarlet and I think that would've been a minus point.

You seem very modest about your own contribution to the project.

I'm involved in everything that's going on,



from the scripts right the way through to the finished picture. But I'm anxious to say that there's a huge amount of credit due to the rest of the team.

One member of that team is scriptwriter Phil Ford, carefully selected by you.

With the stories, my principle role is right at the beginning – to find writers who can write my kind of material. They're very few and far between but I eventually managed to get hold of Phil, who is utterly outstanding. I won't take any credit for the stories, Phil was responsible for all the stories he wrote. I would go through a script, not to vet it but to read them and simply say to him, this is a wonderful sequence, what if you did this as well as what you've written? That would heighten it wouldn't it? Phil and I got on extremely well but if he felt he was right, he would defend it like a caged tiger. And that's only what I would expect of a good writer. Equally, if he could see that I had a point he would immediately say, "Oh, I see what you mean, that's a good idea, I'll do that."

Did the CGI approach give you a lot more flexibility for character development?

When we made our series using puppets, the heads were made of fibre-glass and there was no change of expression. So, for instance, if we make up a bit of a scene, say there's a knock at the door, and Scarlet is there, and he tells the woman who answers the door that her son has been killed in a motor accident. In the script it would probably say something like her face crumpled and she burst into

tears. This couldn't be conveyed with puppets but it could be conveyed with CGI. So we had much more opportunity to give emotional reactions to the characters. And again, praise where it's due, Phil Ford's writing and dialogue helps to convey this.

How easy was it turning the story into a final episode?

When we started I was, as usual, asking for far more than I could reasonably expect. We went through quite a long period up front of people saying, "Well, you just can't do that Gerry." I was quite insistent that I wanted to do things but I didn't shout at them and say well you've got to do it somehow. I got genuinely upset because it spoilt my mental image of how I wanted it to be.

People responded to this by doing research and development and then they'd race in and say, "We've found out how to do it!" By the time we got through the first two episodes, we'd moved the whole process on immensely.

I expect that the finished episodes have left you with some good memories.

It was great to see them on the big screen with cinema sound. I remember going to the one show with the whole unit. We had a sort of Red Arrow display going on and I felt tears running down my face. It was the first time in my career where I was looking at something that was exactly as I wanted to make it. I remember thinking I'll have to stop this before the lights go up but I was so touched by what I'd seen, it was just lump in the throat time.

GERRY ANDERSON & RICHARD MORRIS

One of those responsible for provoking such an emotional response in Anderson is CGI Supervisor Richard Morris. How did your involvement begin, Richard?

I was initially hired as head of assets, responsible for the modelling and creation of all assets excluding characters. That included vehicles, aircraft, sets, exterior sets, landscapes and most of the props. I supervised a modelling team of around fifteen people, and a big part of the job was detailing a specific process whereby each model file was cleaned and streamlined and any necessary rigging was setup to a standardised fashion.

I only really created one model myself. That was when I first started and there were literally six 3D people in total and we just all began by building one vehicle each. I picked the Condor for myself, the massive cargo plane. I spent over three weeks on it and had some real good fun doing the interior and getting the curvaceous lines of the plane correct. After that, the modelling pipeline was hotting up so I turned to management full time.

We had an extremely tough schedule creating all the Spectrum assets in time for the motion capture shoots for episode one and two but we did manage it with a lot of hard work. Unfortunately, towards Christmas, relationships worsened and some key people left the project. There was suddenly a No Man's Land period whilst we waited for a new head of production to come over from the US.

That period was really crisis time and we had about two months to finish the first two episodes. A few shots had been completed under the old pipeline but most were still outstanding so it was a massive challenge and a real big push. We constructed three new lighting and rendering teams and split both episodes up into chunks and simply ploughed through it. I was given a temporary role overseeing all three teams and making sure that the imagery was not being compromised, whilst also helping bridge the gap between production and the artists,

helping ensure that deadlines were being met.

This continued until eventually we finally delivered episodes one and two and hence fulfilled those very important contractual obligations with the finance people. The work we did in those two months, the distance we came from having just a handful of finished shots to having two really exciting watchable episodes was simply phenomenal. It was a very testing time but quite incredible looking at what we all achieved. The best thing was that we knew that whatever we produced next, it would be twice as good as the first two episodes given the difficult conditions those were produced under.

You became supervisor for the Green team, one of the four (green, red, white and blue) CGI teams created to add specific effects to the episodes. What did that involve?

My main overriding input was to get each episode complete in the best way possible for the best end result. Along with my coordinator, at the beginning of each episode we used to sit down, look at all the twenty one or so people at our disposal, look at the script, break it down and then work out how best to get it done and distribute the workload.

Beyond that, day to day, my main concern was the overall look, the image quality, and the consistency of quality and lighting. During actual shot production I would keep an eye on the consistency from shot to shot and ensure that light, colour and shadow and most importantly compositing style matched from shot to shot, sequence to sequence. I was also involved in troubleshooting people's problems whether it be rigging issues with characters, animation or motion capture data problems, whatever.

The final role was gathering the episode up into a completed piece and managing its eventual sign off with the directors. This involved a lot of shot fixing and feeding shots back to lighters and compositors for changes and took up nearly all my time in the last two weeks of any episode.

Working on so many episodes must have generated some favourite sequences?

There are many good action sequences, from great dogfights in 'Virus' to the never-ending climax of 'Trap'. But from the episodes that my team completed, the opening fencing sequence in 'The Homecoming' was the very first section I tackled as CG Supervisor and strangely it still remains one of my favourites. It has a strong sense of realism and some great lighting by Adam Willis. The motion capture, sound of clashing swords and the loose camera work just add up to something that has a sort of grace and serenity about it, and visually its quite minimal and clean which I personally find very appealing. Its almost graphic in places particularly in a couple of almost orthogonal symmetrical shots that look like they come straight out of an old Peter Greenaway film. When I see that sequence there's nothing that bugs me or stands out as something I would like to change.

I expect the animators also had some fun adding little 'finishing touches' to episodes?

Oooh yeah! There's a scene in 'Mercury Falling' in the records office where Captain Black is flicking through some record files of people and these ID cards come up with little photographs of people – who are actually the CGI crew. We also wrote our initials on textures where you had code numbers, like aircraft wings and the sides of vehicles.

In my team I started this thing with animals and if we had any free moments (which wasn't often) I used to have the lighting people get some stray wildlife into the shots. In 'Heist', we got some chickens hopping about in the two shots of the exterior barn before Captain Blue goes in to get the baddie and also rats in the underground nuclear shelter. We created crows fluttering out of the hedgerows and some of the other teams did the same. I know there was a stag running across the road in one of the episodes... in fact come to think of it, that may have been the animal that started the whole craze in the first place. ■

INTERMISSION

STORIES • SUNDOWNER SHEILA BY F. GWYNPLAINE MACINTYRE • ILLUSTRATED BY DOUGLAS SIROIS



Sundowner Sheila

F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre





It's always noonday hereabouts, it's always bloody noon.

This red sand is as dry as a nun's nasty, with the sun like a giant copper half-penny and all. Sometimes, when I'm busy digging holes and I can't look up for a while, the sun will sneak a little ways towards the horizon. But as soon as I look up at the lavender sky, the damned sun is right back where it always is: noonday-high and hanging over me like a scavenger. It's always bloody noon right hereabouts.

I asked Dicko about it, just today. Well, it's *always* today, because we've never had a sunset here. I call this place Never-Night, but Dicko says we're in the Land of the Long Today. Still, everything since the last time I woke up is *today's* today, if you take my meaning, and not the today that happened yesterday.

Just today I was digging grade trenches, for the irrigation tubes. It's thirsty work, and hard yacker. I kept digging a hole in the red sand, but the sand at the edges of the hole kept pouring back in while I'm emptying it. There's nowt under the sand but more sand and a layer of shincracker stones. So I keep digging the same hole over and over, until Dicko walks past me with a thingummy for the soil evaporation cycle. I put my shovel down, and I slap a crabfly away from my eyes while I says to Dicko: "*Phwor!* Sure is hot in this part of the scrub, innit?"

Dicko gives me a shonky look, and he says: "I keep tellin' yer, Bodger. We're not in the scrub. This ain't Australia, remember? This here is Noowoz, on the planet Terry Nover."

"Well, what's that when it's at home, then?" I ask him.

"You boof-head, I've told yer before." Dicko puts down the heavy donk he's carrying. "Give a listen this time. Here's the drum: we're on the second planet orbiting a star called Delta Pavonis. The planet's been divvied up, y'see, into zones to be colonised by different Earth nations. The Yanks took a slice of this planet, the Pommies took a slice, and such. This here crust of the planet is at the arse-end of nowhere, so of course they gave it to the Australians."

"Izzat why it's so hot, then?" I asked him.

"Nah, mate," says Dicko, with that smirk he gets when he's all up himself with his own cleverness. "This here planet Terry Nover is orbiting in yer bog-standard type of synchronous rotation round the yellow subgiant star Delta Pavonis, innit? The planet's sidereal period is almost bang equal to its orbital period, so the planet keeps one side always facing the sun, and t'other half always skivin' off nightside. There's one ridgy-didge section in the middle of the planet, which is reserved for the la-di-dah posh colonists from Earth, and where the sun Delta Pavonis rises and sets on a reg'lar basis, on account of planetary libration an' that. And beyond there is Totherside, where the sun never rises

at all. But you and me, Bodger, we've got ourselves stuck into the Evernoon zone, in the zero meridian, where the sun's always within a few degrees of zenith. So you'll never see a nightfall till the day you cark it." Then Dicko picks up his thingummy and he hoicks it towards the donga hut.

"Dicko," says I, "how come you're such a cluey brains artist?"

"Can't help it," he says. "I was compozzed that way, same as you can't help that you're compozzed to be a nong-head with a hole in yer brain for the memories to leak out. The Terraform Division scripted my DNA to make me smart, and they scripted yours to make yer otherwise. The Terry Divvers figured you'd be all aptituded for repetitive physical labour if they brewed yer brain to have low memory retention. I keep tellin' yer this, and you keep forgettin' it every time I explain it. Now shift yer freckle, and let's get back to this here irrigation line."

"Right you are, Dicko," I says. "But it's a hot day, an' that. I wish we could choof off for a while and just sit back with a couple of coldies."

"No worries, mate," Dicko tells me. "Today's a half-holiday, so we only work till sunset. Same as yesterday."

Then Dicko legs himself off to the donga hut, and I got back to work. The hole I'd been digging had filled itself up while I wasn't looking, so I copped my shovel and mucked in again.

I kept working till noon, and roundabout noontime I look up at a dustcloud approaching. That means either a windstorm or visitors. This here dusty was shaped like a funnel, so I knew there was a jouncer inside it. I ran to the donga hut, and I banged on the door. "Dicko!" I calls in. "We've got visitors. Maybe it's the next tucker-up."

"Stow yer bull-wool," Dicko calls out to me through the insect-netting. "Can't be time for a tucker-up. We're not due the next supply drop for months yet."

The funnel of wind and sand was getting closer. "Bloody oath we've got visitors, Dicko!" I told him. "Or *one* visitor, leastways."

"Reckon some compozzie bastard from the next outpost guzzled all his water rations, and now he's comin' here to guff us out of some of ours," says Dicko through the fly-net, never looking up from some machine he's building. "Whoever it is, tell him to rack off."

The funnel of sand blew into the middle of our compound, and then it faded as the jouncer stopped. A man got out and squonked his horn. At first I thought he was a compozzie, same as me and Dicko. But then I saw his skin: pale and fine, with no sunburn. He was either a new-brewed compozzie, or else he wasn't a compozzie at all. Then I saw he was wearing goggles, so I knew he was a human.

We don't get many humans here, but I always feel all toey and embarrassed when one of them arrives. They can spot a mile off that I'm a compozzie. Dicko's a compozzie too, but he looks nearabouts human with his clothes on, if you ignore a few bits and bobs of him: mostly his hands and his eyes. Dicko and me were scripted and brewed up with double-dutch eyelids, to keep the sand and insects out of our eyes. We've got no eyelashes worth mentioning, but we've got double eyelids. Humans haven't the proper sort of eyes for this neighbourhood, so they wear goggles hereabouts.

The human wore a scarf across the lower half of his face, to keep the sand from blowing into his nose and mouth. Even though half his face was scarved, he looked familiar...but I couldn't recall where I'd met him before. Now he saw me, and his face got all shonky.

"You're not the senior unit at this duty station," he tells me. His voice sounded familiar too. "Your craniofacial matrix indicates you're a subordinate genotype. Who's in charge of this outpost?"

The donga hut's door banged open as Dicko came running, and he saluted the human. Actual, Dicko was swatting a crabfly, but he made it look as if he was saluting. "All present and correct, proceeding to schedule at this station, sir," says Dicko, with that posh voice he uses when there's a human nearby.

The scarf-man looked relieved to see Dicko, and I knew why. I don't come within a long coo-ee of looking human, but when Dicko shades his eyes and hides his hands you'd never know he's a compozzie. Even his ears look human, which mine don't. Whenever a human comes hereabouts – *any* human – I notice they get nervous when they see me, and they never want to look me in the eyes. They'll give Dicko a fair do, though.

The scarf-faced man nodded, and now I was sure that I'd met him before. "Right," he says to Dicko. "I've brought your rations and supplies. I'll need your retinal scan before I release the consignment. Tell your subbo here to muck in, and lend a hand. His genome was designed for heavy labour."

"You heard the boss, Bodger," says Dicko to me, and we both go to unload the jouncer. I was expecting the usual lurk: it would be my job to carry all the big heavy containers, with our tucker-bricks and tools and that, while Dicko would take charge of the gazintas. Every time our supplies come, there are always a few scientific thingums that I'm not supposed to handle, and Dicko always tells me that the high-tech stuff gazinta his personal shanty. Now we got to the jouncer, and suddenly Dicko stopped: "What's all this?"

The jouncer was crammed with large crates, stamped with the Terry Divvy's mark. I can't read words or numbers, but you bet I know that mark. "This ain't our regular tucker," says Dicko, forgetting to talk posh.

The Terry Divvy man nodded. "Your nutrient allotment is stowed beneath the other cargo. This is a special shipment from the Terraform Division. You will make it safe against bio-contamination." Just then a crabfly landed on the Terry Divvy man's nose, and he slapped himself. I tried not to let my grin show: Dicko and me were brewed up with something extra in our sweat-glands so the crabflies don't much like the taste of us. They'll buzz about near our eyes, on account of the moisture, but the flies never bite a compozzie's bare skin unless they're abso-deffy desperate.

Dicko took a squizz at the printed label on the toppermost box. "I'm not trained to handle this equipment, sir."

"You will be," said the Terry Divvy man, and his voice seemed more familiar every second. "There's an irrigation specialist due here tomorrow to upgrade your indoctrination memories."

"Now I know where I've seen yer before!" I said to the Terry Divvy. I reached over and whipped off his scarf. "You're the Crown Magistrate in Dublin who sentenced me to ten years' transportation!"

The Terry Divvy looked gobsmacked. "Beg pardon?" he says.

"Come off the grass, mate," I tell him. "You're the beak what sent me to the prison colony at Sydney Cove!"

The Terry Divvy man groaned, and looked at Dicko. "Is your subordinate always like this?"

"Only when he's awake," said Dicko. "I wish your bosses would send me a compozzie with a decent memory. Bodger here, he's a few shingles short of a sheep-shack. Sometimes Bodger gets cluey for half an hour or so, and he sounds near intelligent, but then he

always goes boofy again." Dicko reached up and smacked me on the forehead. "Right, Bodger, here's the true oil: you're not from Dublin. You're not Irish. You're not even human, mostly. This ain't Australia, and it ain't a prison colony... though it sure seems like one. Those are dead men's memories scripted into yer noggin. Side effect of the DNA recom. You've got dead Australians in yer head. Now shut yer tucker-chute, and give us a hand with these parcels. You cop the heavies, and I'll take charge of the gazintas."

We started unloading the jouncer. The wind was rising, and the Terry Divvy man kept looking at some thingo on his wrist to check the time. I don't know why he did that, since even a blind nerk could tell by looking at the sun that just now it was noon.

"Shift a shank, you lot," the Terry Divver said to me and Dicko, while I wrestled some containers out of the jouncer. "I'm in a hurry back to Sundown."

"Where's that, then?" I asked.

"Sundown is where you and I were brewed up, Bodger," says Dicko to me whilst he worked. "Sundown is what they cry the humans' colony in the libration zone, along the central meridians of this planet." Then he asks the Terry Divvy man: "Izzit true? It's in my memory, but I've never actual seen it. Does the sun really go down *below the horizon*? Straight oil? Do you actual have *night*?"

"Yes, at regular intervals," said the goggle-faced man. "Every forty-seven days, in fact."

"Phwor! I'd like to see *that*, and no mistake!" says Dicko. "Hear him, Bodger? The days and nights take it in turns! Maybe when we finish irrigating this desert, those posh folk in the libration zone will loan us a couple of their extra sunsets, and bring 'em out here to Never-Night where we can use them!"

That sounded champion to me, so I helped Dicko unload the jouncer as fast as I could, and we worked twenty to the dozen.

I saw the Terry Divvy man writing something in a keypad that had a bright green cover. Green's the colour I like best, because there's nothing green hereabouts. Just red sand and lavender sky and the damned copper sun. That Sundown place must be where the green things come from. I wish I had something green to keep with me here.

The Terry Divvo followed Dicko to his hut, and started telling him how one of the gazintas worked. I kept hoying up heavy crates from the back of the jouncer, and hoicking them to our supply shed, and then going back for more.

The Terry Divvy man had left his billycan under the seat of the jouncer. The billy was open, and I could see a few thingos inside it: clothes and a disk-deck, and summat shiny. The shiny thing was a jack-knife, with a shiny green thing in its handle. I like green things and I like shiny things. Well, shiny things except the sun. I looked round: the man from the Terryform Division was way over at the far end of the compound with Dicko. From three hundred meters off, I could hear him saying he was in a big hurry to get back to Sundown. Sometimes Dicko laughs at my big floppy ears, but not even Dicko knows how far I can hear.

The Terry Divvo could get another knife for himself back in Sundown, any colour he liked... but I wanted this green one. So I nicked the jack-knife out of his billy and I crammed it into my dungarees. Just then Dicko comes back, after I'd done most of the yacker and all the heaviest, and he helps me do the last bit of unloading the jouncer.

By the time we'd finished, it was noon. The Terry Divvy man got back into his machine and gunned the drive. I got out of his way as a funnel of sand billowed up. Then he was gone, leaving me alone with just Dicko and seventeen million crabflies under the copper-coloured sun. But now at least I had a knife.

We kept working till noon, and then Dicko said it was time to

bog into our dinner. I broke open a chonk of tucker-bricks, and when I copped a sniff I didn't recognise the flavour. "The bosses sent us something new to eat," I said.

Dicko looked at me shonkwise and diagonal. "You nong-head!" says he, as he unwraps one of the bricks of concentrated nutrient. He bit off a corner of the brick, chewed it, made a daggy face, and swallowed. "That's curried mutton, that is. Same as bloody yesterday, same as the bloody day before, and same as the bloody year before that." Dicko copped a squizz at some printing on the brick's wrapper. "Those fookin' Terry Divver bastards! Three months' worth of rations they give us, and every perishin' brick of it is curried mutton!" He took another bite of his brick, and kept reading the wrapper. "And it's not even fair-dinkum genuine curried mutton. Syn-bloody-thetic ingredients! Crypto-curry and sham lamb. Gives yer a dose of the gripes and a double dose of the gotta-gos."

I'm allowed double rations, as I'm twice the size of Dicko, so I unwrapped a tucker-brick and crammed it into my gob while I unwrapped another one. "Tastes yummo to me," I said to Dicko,

with my mouth full. "I've never had curried mutton before, far as I can remember."

Dicko shook his head. "There are times when I envy you, Bodger... but not often."

The new supply drop included some battery packs, fully charged, so Dicko decided we could cut free for once and use some of our electricity rations to run the sonic shower. The shower-pit's too small to hold us both at once, so Dicko said he'd have the first go.

That's all pearly to me. I don't want Dicko to have a shufti at me when I'm naked, or even when I'm stripped down to my scungies. Mostwhiles, Dicko and me are mates, but when we've taken off our clobber and we can see each other in the nuddy, I always chuck a mental.

Dicko's luckier than me. I don't know why the Terry Divvers decided to brew *him* up to be nearly human, but not *me* too. Sometimes, when I try hard to catch hold of one of the memories scripted into my head, I can *almost* recall being human... but it's someone else's memory, not mine. In my gundy hut, I've got a bit

of broken mirror that I twocked off one of Dicko's microscopes. I keep the mirror hid where Dicko can't find it. When I go into my gundy and I close the door, I look at myself in my mirror and I try to figure out which parts of me ain't human and why not. Sometimes the memory comes, but then something snatches it back again.

I remember being human, but it's someone else's life.

It really burrs me rough to know the Terry Divvos could have scripted me almost human, like Dicko, and they decided not to. In some ways, I'm better than him – my ears can hear farther than his – but there's no question which of us has got more of the figjam. Dicko explained it once, but I can't remember. It's down to all the different men inside my head. Somewhere in my brain is a piece of a dead genius...but there's plenty of dubbo bits too, from some dead old bush-bastards who lived stupid and died stupider. Sometimes, for a few minutes, the genius memories in my noddle wake up for a few ticks...and then I'm nearly as clued-up as Dicko is, and I can almost understand why I was scripted this way. But then on the sudden my brain gets all jaked, and I'm a deadset nong-head again.

The part I miss most is the women. *Human* women, I mean: there aren't any female compozzies, because nobody never brewed one. I remember three women who worked in the genome lab, when I was brewed up at Sundown. They talked all posh and hoity, like Lady Muck, as if they had plums in their mouths or summat. Not like the way they made *me* talk. Those women in the genome lab, they compozzed me so's I have to talk bad grammar, and I speak bush-slang even when I know the proper word for a thingo. I remember those lab-women looking at me as if I was a speck of dirt off the bottom of their blunny-boots. I can't recall the women's faces. Dicko says I'm built this way a-purpose: if I can't think about women, then I'll keep to my job and I'll not get distracted.

Dicko was in the shower, so I went outside and looked up at the sun to see what time it is. It was noon. I remember the stars. I remember nightfall. I remember the night sky, back home. Sometimes, when I close all my eyelids and try hard, I can see the night sky and the constellations. I remember watching the Southern Cross in the sky above the Coat Hanger...that's what we locals call the Sydney Harbour Bridge, on account of how it slopes at the shoulders, like. You can't see the Southern Cross too well in Australia's midsummer, November or December, when the Cross is nearly down on the horizon and all the buildings and lights of Sydney block the view. But in midwinter – May and June, when the weather is cooler – the Southern Cross and the Pointers are high and glorious in the sky above the Big Smoke. You lay your oath I'm proud to be a Sydneysider.

I closed my eyes now, and I remembered winter. I was standing at Taronga Wharf on the north edge of Sydney Harbour, with the sea wind blowing west from Lady Macquarie's Chair to Balmain, and the Southern Cross was shining overhead. I remember. I remember.

Then something clicked in my brain, and I opened all my eyelids and I saw the copper-coloured sun at high noon in the lavender sky. And I remembered that I'm not a Sydneysider, and I've never been to Sydney, nor I've never been to Earth. Nor I ain't never human.

And this planet's got no Southern Cross, nor ever any stars. And there's a night somewhere else for the posh folks who live in Sundown, but there's never a nightfall for me.

The back of my neck was itching again, at the base of my skull where those lab-cookies in Sundown put their metal thingo inside me: the *woggle*, is what I cry it when I can't recall its proper name. I reached one hand round behind me, and both of my thumbs on that hand probed the back of my neck, where the woggle lurked beneath my skin. What's it for, then? I dunno.

I stripped down to my scungies and headed for the sonic shower, just as Dicko came out of the shower-pit, all clean and in the nuddy. Now he pointed to a raw purple sore on my right shoulder, where my skin was peeling off. "That's new, that one is," Dicko tells me. "How'd you hurt yerself?"

"That's where I got shot," I said. "You remember, Dicko. At Gallipoli. You and me, we served together in the Twenty-First Battalion, Anzacs."

Dicko looks at me and shakes his head, and then he goes back to his hut. When he passed me, I noticed the bulge at the base of his skull, and a titchy small scar where the lab blokes implanted his woggle. Dicko's got a subdermal implant – right, *that's* the name for it – at the base of his brain, same as me.

I took a shower quick-like, then I went back to my gundy hut and reached into my dungarees. I took out the knife, and held it safe and welcome in my left hand.

The knife had two little blades, bright and sharp. It reminded me of my cane-knife. When I was a lad growing up in Queensland, in the Cape York Peninsula, I tried to sign on as a cane-cutter at one of the sugar plantations. The boss cookie, the overseer, he said he'd take me on, and he held out his pen for me to sign the work-articles. I reached for it with my left hand, and straight off he pulled away the pen again. Asked me if I was a molly-dooker, a sissy-fist, a left-hander. I told him I was.

"*Can't use yer, mate,*" I remember he told me. "*Ever seen a team of cane-cutters? They stand toe-together in the canefield, close ranks, with their machetes in their right hands. Have to stand side by side, y'see, so they don't miss any cane between 'em when they advance. Then they all move forrards t'gether, and they all cut the cane with the same stroke, like this.*" I remember the overseer in his station-office, reaching out his right hand to pick up a machete and make a cutting motion left to right across his waist. "*Now, how would it look if I had three men cuttin' that way together, and one molly-dooker alongside 'em with his blade in the wrong hand, cuttin' the opposite way, and most likely slicing up my best men?*" The foreman snatched back the work articles before I could sign 'em, and he jerked his head sidelong towards the door. "*You scarper off, my lad. I've got three thousand acres of cane that wants cutting, but there's plenty of right-handed men who can do it better'n you.*"

So that's how I ended up diggin' holes in a planet spinnin' round a copper-coloured sun called Delta Pavonis, all because I'm left-handed. If I was right-handed, I'd likely still be back on Earth, cutting cane-brakes in the Cape York Peninsula.

One of the men in my head was laughing at me, telling me I'd never been to Queensland, and telling me I'd never been a cane-cutter, and telling me I'm not even left-handed. I knew he was lying, though, because I could remember them things.

I hid the knife where Dicko wouldn't find it. By now I was cabbaged, so I dosed down and got ready to sleep. I think I know what dreams are, because sometimes there are blokes in my head who can remember having dreams. But I've never had a dream, me. So I closed all my eyelids, and I tried hard to dream about the night and the stars, in a green place.

When I finished making seeds and I woke up, it was noon. Dicko

and I opened up the new supplies, and made some brekkie. Dicko said it was curried mutton. It tasted yummo: I've never had curried mutton before.

"Look sharp, lad," says Dicko to me while we're noshing. "The irrigation specialist will give us a blow-in today, come to 'doctrinate' us. You give a listen to him, Bodger. Open them flappy ears of yours when he talks, and don't be givin' him yer bull-wool about how you used to be one of Ned Kelly's bushrangers at Stringybark Creek."

We got back to work. I was digging grade trenches, same as ever and always. Each time I dug one out, the sand fell in and filled it up again. I worked for a couple of hours, and then around noon I heard a whirring in the faraway that sounded like a dusty.

I looked up, and reckon sure there was a red funnel of sand coming across the desert. The jouncer stopped, and the sand settled as the driver squonked his horn. A man climbed out of the jouncer, and I noticed straight off there was something poddoo about him. He was shaped all peculiar: not a dinkum man at all. For a second, I thought he was a compozzie, brewed up from some new template. Then I copped why he was shaped like that.

He was a woman.

She was a woman, I mean. She was all covered up in dungarees and blunny-boots and a sun hat, but her work-clothes didn't hide her shape. She was sweet in all the right parts. I started to run towards the she-human, but then a man inside my head whispered to remind me that humen usual get scared first time they see me, and huwomen might too. The woman had her back turned, on account she was taking some big donk out of the Terraform Division's jouncer.

When I got closer, I saw she had what we call in the bush a *moon tan*, meanin' she didn't have a tan at all. So she must have come from Sundown, then. Her skin was pale and delicate: at least, her hands and the back of her neck were, an' that. Those were the only parts I could see of her bare skin. Then she turned towards me. She was wearing sunglasses with dark lenses. Now she opened her mouth to speak, and when I saw those plummy lips I knew straight off that she would talk all posh and hoity-up like Lady Muck.

"Coo-ee, mate," she said. "G'day! Are you Dicko Longjack?"

Those sunglasses over her eyes *must* be dark, if she couldn't tell a subordinate compozzie from a primary. "Nah, Dicko's the primey," I told her. "I'm just his subbo. They cry me Bodger Dillpot."

She took off her sunnies and saw me again. She had long silky eyelashes...and when she blinked her eyelashes, I saw that she had just the regular human pair of eyelids. Not double-door eyelids like me and Dicko.

Then I saw her eyes. *Green*, like the lovely green opals I used to fossick in the Coober Pedy opal mines in South Australia. So I knew she was from Sundown, in this planet's central zone. Where the green things come from.

I could see a few smidges of dark brown hair poking out of her hat. Something in her face wasn't dinkum, and I wished I could be

sure of how a woman's face is meant to be shaped. Her cheekbones seemed a little higher than a man's, and her nose seemed too flat. Her eyebrow ridges and her lips seemed too big and too full.

A man in the back of my head started whispering to me that this jillaroo from Sundown had the biggest pair of norks he'd ever seen. I couldn't recall if I'd heard of *norks* before, but somehow I knew what they were. "*Call them breasts: it's more respectful*," said another man in my head. I told the blokes inside my brain to cut the cackle, while I looked at the woman.

There was something crook about her mouth: it was the wrong shape, or summat. Nobody I'd ever met before had a mouth shaped like that, at least not when they looked at me. I fair needed a minute to remember the word for what her mouth was doing. And then all at once I remembered.

She was *smiling* at me. Not a smirk like Dicko, but a dinkum honest smile. "Bodger, hey? That's a pearl name you got," she said. She held out her right hand, as if she had summat inside it for me to take. I didn't cop onto that, so she reached high up and caught hold of *my* right hand with hers. That got me all toey, 'cause my grip could crush her fingers like matchwood. She started shaking hands with me, and then she suddenly said "*Oh!*" and she dropped my bunch of fives like it was a cut snake.

"Your hand!" she said, and her green eyes got wide. "It's got an extra...I mean...*Strewth!* I knew they'd altered your genome, but..."

I whipped my arms behind my back, to hide my hands so they wouldn't scare her. I've got as many fingers as the next bloke, only not the same way. The man inside my head was talking louder now, trying to confuse me. I could feel the wobble in my neck just beginning to tingle.

The she-human beckoned me to come closer. "No worries, cobber," she said. "You'll be right. Please. Let me see." She gently reached behind me, feeling for my wrist. She smiled again, so I let one hand out from behind me. Just *one* hand, not both: no sense in scaring the lady more than necessary. I gave her my right hand, on account I'm right-handed.

She touched each of my fingers gently, exploring them with her own. "Two opposable thumbs on the same hand, and only three fingers," she said, and there was summat in her voice as if she wasn't scared any more. "The genome scripters must have decided that this template would be better for certain manual tasks."

"You...you like my hands?" I asked, and let her see the other one.

"Oh, fair up I do," she said. She talked Strine – outback Australian – like me and Dicko, but there was just a hint of posh in her voice that somehow made her sound even lusher than she looked. "I was just surprised by your hands before, Bodger, that's all. But now I've had a squizz, I can see they're rather nice. You've got...*koala hands*."

"Wozzat when it's at home, then?"

"Hands like a koala." She made a gesture that I didn't catch, because the bastard in my head was getting louder. "A koala's

forepaw has three fingers and a double thumb, for tree-climbing. I'm from south Queensland, back to home: that's the part of Australia where the koalas live."

"Queensland?" I asked, trying to hear her sexy voice and trying not to listen to the roaring jackaroo inside my head. "So you're not from Sundown, then?"

She made a face like I'd said something daggy. "Sundown? Too wrong, mate! Not likely I'd be a Sundowner. I'm a true blue Oztralian, no worries. Mind you, the Terraform cockies have got me stationed in Sundown till this irrigation project's done, but then I'm heading back to Earth and going home to Down Under. I'm a Queenslander, straight up and proud." She put out her hand again. "M'name's Sheila Kooranda."

That's a blackie name! Well, I sudden went berko, and the man in my head traded places with me. "I knew it!" said someone inside my head, who was me and not me, both at the same go. I saw Sheila Kooranda's eyes go big and terrified, and straight away I felt all blokey. "You're a friggin' abo, you are!" I yelled at her. She had pale skin and green eyes, but now I knew where she got them big lips and that flat nose and her wooly brows. "You're a fookin' loobrah! Yeh dirty black bint! We don't want you lot in..."

Someone clocked me hard, and sprawled me. I looked up from the sand, and I saw Dicko standing over me with his fists up and ready to hit me again. "Want me to job you another, then?" he asked me. "Get up off yer chocolate starfish and 'pologise to the lady."

"No, it's all right," said Sheila Kooranda. Her voice sounded calm, but as I got up I saw she was upset. "Back in Sundown, they warned me about how you composites sometimes get confused: each of you has got conflicting memories and personalities from several different human brains, and..."

"There's nowt wrong wi' my memory!" I shouted, cocking my fists. "I remember how you blackie abo bastards stole my..."

"Stow that grizzle, mate, before you come a gutzer," said Dicko, stepping between me and the woman, and lifting his knuckles to show his two bunches of fives. That took some curry, and no mistake: Dicko is faster than me, but I'm taller and heavier than he is, and bloody oath I'm stronger than him. If it ever comes to a real stosh-up, I could kill him sure. "Fair do's, lad," says Dicko to me. "Tell the lady you didn't mean it, and apologise."

All the bits inside my head were rearranging again, and I couldn't remember what I'd done to start the barney. "Right, I'm sorry, then," I mumbled to the she-human. "I was just earbashing on yer. I apologise, Miss Kooranda."

"No probs, mate: I know y' didn't mean it. You just made a blue, is all." She smiled again. "It's cool bananas. And m'name's *Sheila*, not Miz Kooranda."

"Sorted, you lot," Dicko says. "Now let's guff off this yabber, and get some work done." He turns away from me. "Miz Kooranda... I mean, *Sheila*: the boss cockie from the Terraform Division told us that an irrigation expert would be coming to this outpost. Actual, I expected they'd send us a *man*."

Sheila grinned. She had a mischievous grin, and I liked it straight off. "Surely you don't object to getting your indoctrinations from a *woman*."

Dicko grinned back at her. "No, I reckon you're not wrong there," he said. There was something in his voice I'd never heard before, and I didn't much like it. "Where do we start?"

"I'll need one of the boxes from your last consignment," said

Sheila from Sundown, sounding all brisk and efficient now. "The one tagged 'K'."

"Got it in my shanty," said Dicko. He motioned Sheila to follow him. I came along, but when we got to the insect-netting on his shanty's door, Dicko gave me a shonky look. I've never been inside Dicko's shack; I'm too big to fit through the door. He raised the fly-wire and kept it high until Sheila walked through, then he dropped it behind as he went in after her. Then he sealed the door, and left me outside with the flies.

I stood there, feeling as useful as an empty beer-tinnie, and half as popular. I looked up at the sun to see what time it was now: about noon. I started walking away, until I heard a strange high sound from inside Dicko's shanty. I'd never heard a noise like that before, but somehow I remembered what it was, and I knew the word for it: Sheila was *giggling*. "Really, Mister Longjack!" I heard her say through the wall, and then she giggled again. "You don't half come flash!"

"Too right I don't," said Dicko. "And the name's *Dicko*, mind, though you're not wrong to call me *Longjack*." Then I heard him whisper something, and Sheila from Sundown giggled again. With my big ears, I'd have easily heard what Dicko was whispering – he was only thirty meters away – but now the blokes in the back of my head were all muttering louder. Then Sheila from Sundown giggled again, and after that I didn't hear nowt for a while. Then the door to Dicko's shanty opened. He and Sheila came out, looking like they shared a big secret.

Dicko was carrying a crate with the Terry Divvo's red mark on it, and underneath was a symbol in black. One of the blokes in my brain said this was the letter 'K', and a brainier voice farther back in my head whispered summat that sounded like: "*K is the chemical symbol for the element potassium.*"

Sundowner Sheila took a knife off her belt, and touched it to the Terry Divvo mark. A line appeared in the top of the box. The line got wider, and split open, and then the top of the box sort of hinged itself backwards.

The box was full of shiny crystals. They reminded me of salt, only these crystals were big flakes. They *smelled* salty, too. I couldn't rumble why anyone would be drongo enough to bring salt into a desert.

Sheila took something else off her belt: a metal thingo with two little windows in it, one above t'other. She touched something, and the little window on the bottom lit up bright red and started blinking.

"This won't hurt," said Sheila, and she lifted the blinky red thing way up towards my face. I raised one arm, instinctive-like, but Sheila gently nudged my arm aside while she raised that blinky box to the back of my neck, where the lab crew had put their woggle into me. "I just have to upgrade the data core in your cybernetic memory implant," Sheila whispered.

I felt her fingers touch the base of my neck, pressing the metal thingo against me: the metal felt *hot*. I heard a click, and then I felt the cluey smart man inside my head start to sit up and take notice, while the dimmer blokes inside my brain went to sleep.

And now I heard a woman's voice inside my brain. At first I thought Sheila was talking, but this woman's voice was all posh and unfriendly: "*In the New Australia zone of the planet Delta Pavonis Two, also known as Terra Nova,*" said the she-voice in my head, "*the Terraform Division will utilise drip irrigation, as this offers less evaporation loss than other irrigation methods. On a Gaia-class planet, you would be instructed to lay drip systems at grade and mulch over them, introducing water directly to the*

root zone at a controlled hydration rate. Survey teams have not discovered any aquifers on Delta Pavonis Two, and the planet has not yet been sufficiently terraformed for the drip-irrigation technique to be viable. The porous soil in the planet's New Australia zone, being primarily sand, takes water easily but retains little of it."

I didn't cop most of this, but I knew that someone in my brain was enough of a shrewdy to suss it out. "To prevent water runoff when soil tension is low, you will employ the crystals supplied by the Terraform Division," said the plummy woman's voice, and somehow I twigged that she meant the salty stuff inside the K-crate. "These are potassium-based polymer crystals. As the subordinate composite unit for this duty station, it will be your task to distribute these crystals in the projected root zone of your outpost. Your immediate superior, the primary composite unit, will determine the proper depth and location for a suitable root zone. When added to the desert soil, these polymer crystals will absorb excess water from the irrigation runoff, and expand to more than 100 times their original size. After each hydration cycle, as the desert dries up and soil tension increases, the crystals will leach water into the root zone."

I couldn't clue up most of this, but the posh lady was saying that Dicko would give the orders and I'd have to follow 'em. As bloody usual. I looked at Dicko, but he was talking to Sheila...and now he said something that made her laugh. I couldn't hear it, because Lady Muck inside my head was talking posh again:

"The Terraform Division's crate marked 'EVT' contains a sensor array, designed to measure the soil's rate of evapotranspiration, or EVT. The EVT rig includes a tensiometer which measures soil tension directly from the root zone and at ground level. You will install the tensiometer under the supervision of your primary superior. He will monitor EVT readings at 20-hour intervals until you have installed the hardware which will transmit the EVT cycle's telemetry directly to the comsat overhead, orbiting Delta Pavonis Two. Your next task..."

There was more: bundles of it. Meantime, Sheila was walking towards Dicko. She had taken her blinky red thingo away from my neck, but somehow the plummy-voiced woman was still yabbering inside my brain. I saw Dicko grin at Sundowner Sheila, and he jerked his chin towards the door of his shanty...as if to say to her: "Let's go." I saw him open the door, and hold the fly-wire open like a gent holds a door for a posh lady. Then I saw Sheila and Dicko go inside and shut the shanty door behind. I wanted to go after them, but something in the plummy lady's voice, inside my head, made me think I had to stay here while she kept ear-bashing me. So I stood there like a bollard and I got much more drum than I ever wanted to know about irrigation and geology and terraforming and a lorry-load of stuff I'll never need, and that.

Finally I felt another click, and my lesson was over. I'd already forgot most of it, but my head felt twice as full as before. Dicko and Sheila had been inside Dicko's shanty for an hour at least, so I looked up at the sun to see what time it was now: nearly noon. As I went towards the shanty, I heard Sheila Kooranda scream. Only it wasn't a frighty scream: it was more of a happy surprise scream.

"Y' cheeky bastard!" she shrieked, and I heard her and Dicko both laughing. "Now I know why the genome scripters named yer Dicko!" Her voice had lost that little bit of posh, but now she sounded even lusher than ever.

"Bloody oath I'm Dicko by name and I'm Dicko by nature!" I heard him tell her. "Have a squizz at my love-spuds! I've got a rajah the size of Ayers Rock!"

I reached over to lift up the fly-netting on the shanty's nearest

window, but one of the blokes in my head told me to drop it and come away without looking inside. "They're havin' a naughty in there, but it's none of yer bizzo, mate...so piss off," he hissed at me. "And talkin' of piss: why don'tcher go siphon the python, or rinse the prince? Right; I think I'll activate yer urinary reflex."

All of a sudden my bladder felt full as a goog, so I hurried across the compound, to the dunny. The Terryform Division wants Dicko and me to recycle our body-wastes, so we always do our dumps in the dunny. I went into the throttling-pit, undid my daks, yanked my trouser-bowser out of my grundies, and I took a long amber drizzle into the drainpipe that led down to the urine reclaimer.

Suddenly I felt sick, like my guts were tied in granny knots. I finished pissing, and I just managed to shake off the last yellow raindrop, then I ran tother end of the dunny and I lifted the lid off the dunny-pot. I dropped down on my knees, grabbed the porcelain porthole and I did a long rainbow yodel into the dunny-pot.

While I chundered, I could hear Dicko talking from clear across the compound: "Stone the crows, woman! You've got mickey-whiskers all over your map of Tasmania!"

Now I heard Sundowner Sheila laughing: "Come off the grass, Dicko. Don't tell me you've never seen the hair on a lady's goodies before."

Dicko said something to that, but I closed my earlids so I wouldn't hear it. I'd finished ralphing, but now I had a bad taste in my gob. I put the lid down on the dunny-pot, and I sat on it. My dungarees were still open. I sat there, and looked down at my donger.

I've seen Dicko in the nuddy. His todger's bigger than mine, but not the same shape. And he's got spuds: I haven't; not any more. After I grew to my full size, my knackers dropped off like ripe apples. Now the cluey bastard in my head was whispering at me: "Hoy, Bodger! You were born with a pair of jumbo-size goolies, because your endocrine system needed those whacking huge amounts of testosterone so you'd attain maximum body mass. But the genome scripters were afraid too much testosterone would make you dangerous. So they rewrote your DNA to make your pods go all atrophied after you reached puberty, an' that."

My right shoulder was hurting again, from when I'd caught a packet at Gallipoli. After a while I stood up, and I put my trouser-trout back into his billabong.

When I opened my earlids, I could hear Sheila talking in the distance: "What time is it now...stone me! Your subbo must have finished his indocker, nearly half an hour ago!" Now I heard sounds like bedsprings twanging and two people getting dressed in a hurry. "What will your subordinate be thinking?"

"Bodger? Likely he won't think at all." I heard Dicko laugh.

"No worries in that paddock. Bodger's at least three zacks short of a quid. One of the Terry Divvos told me once that Bodger's memory was scripted on the cheap, with DNA from the brains of dead criminals. Even if Bodger is shrewdy enough to suss out that you and I've been having a knee-trembler, he'll forget about it two ticks later." I heard a sound like a belt buckle fastening, and then Dicko spoke again: "Can I offer yer some tuck, lass? We've got a choice of curried mutton, curried mutton, muttoned curry, and bits of muttony muck wi' artificial curry in it. All in convenient dehydrated nutrient bricks, with all the flavour nobbled out."

I walked out of the dunny and looked up at the sun to see what time it was: just about noon. Just then the door to Dicko's shanty opened, and they both came out. Dicko was tucking in his shirt.

Sheila had changed all her rig: now she was wearing a nice light sun-dress that barely covered her at all. I looked at her feet: she'd been wearing blunnies, but now her workboots were gone and she wore a nice slim pair of uggy boots that came up nearly to her knees. When I looked at Sheila's feet I thought her uggy boots looked deadset sexy. All the lads in my head thought so too.

Just before the insect-netting dropped over the door again, I caught a glimpse inside Dicko's shanty. Some of Sheila's luggage from the jouncer had been put inside Dicko's hut while I hadn't noticed. *How long was I listening to that memory-core upgrade?* Dicko and Sheila were holding hands, but when they saw me they let go each the other, and they started acting like two strangers.

"Right you are, erm, *Mister Longjack*," said Sundowner Sheila to Dicko, tucking back her long hair, and her voice got all brisk-like. "Bodger's had his indoctrination, and now it's time for *your* indocker. Hold still."

She reached into a pouch on her sun-dress and she took out the same metal thingo I'd seen before. It still had the two little glass windows, one below t'other. *Memory downloader*, said a whisper in my head that I'd never heard before. *And those two little windows are the transfer indicators*. Now she touched something. I expected the downloader's lower window to turn bright red and start blinking, like when Sheila had indoctrinated me. But this time, the *upper* window started blinking on and off. And it was blinking bright *green*.

Sheila put the thingo at the back of Dicko's neck, very gently. I saw his body go all stiff. All his eyelids fluttered, then I saw his inner eyelids clamp shut while his outer eyelids stayed open. Sheila kept the downloader pressed against Dicko's neck, at the base of his skull where his woggle was implanted, and I knew he was getting an indoctrination. Not the same as *mine*, because mine was red like this perishin' bloody desert. Dicko was getting a green one, from some place far away like Sundown. I wished Sheila would give me the same indocker she gave Dicko. The *green* one.

I turned away, and walked off behind the dunny-hut. The sun was right overhead, same as ever bloody always. I closed all my eyelids, and looked up at the sky, and I tried to pretend it was night. No hopes. The damned sunlight was so fierce, I could see *bright red* through all my double eyelids. I could see the outlines of the veins in my eyelids, through the red heat of the sun. When I close my eyes, I still see everlasting noon.

I heard footsteps behind me. I turned round, and looked. Sheila was there. She had the downloader in her hand, and the green blinky was still winking on and off. Beyond the shed, I saw Dicko standing there, not moving. "You finished already, then?" I asked Sundowner Sheila.

Her long hair tossed and tumbled as she shook her head and smiled. "Not likely. Dicko's indoctrination will be going for a bit." She raised the thingo in her hand, and shut it off so the green light went away. "I've completed Dicko's download, but his hippocampal unit will be processing the input for a while." Sheila's voice was sounding posh again, like some Lady Muck who was born with her thighs glued together. She came over to me, glancing up at the lavender sky to see where I'd been looking. Nothing there but the sun, too right... only Sheila from Sundown looked up at that damned copper sun like it was the pearlest sight she'd ever clapped eyes on.

"Delta Pavonis: 18.63 light-years from Earth," said Sheila in nearly a whisper. She had to shade her beautiful green eyes with one hand, because she had only her thin human eyelids to shut out the sunlight. "Stellar G5-class yellow subgiant, nearly identical to

Earth's G2-class sun, but slightly more golden in colour. Absolute magnitude of 4.8, compared to 4.9 for Earth's sun back to home." It sounded as if Sheila was reciting something she'd learnt in school, but now she did a little breathy thing in her chest that made her norks joggle up and down. "Fair up it's a beauty!" she breathed. Now she looked up at me. "You must be glad," she said, "to live out here, where it's day all the time, and your planet's sun never sets."

I gave her the shonkiest look ever shonked. "Don't farnarkel me, lassie. If you well and truly fancied it out here in the Land of the Long Noon, where the sun never sets, then you'd live here in this zone of the planet, in Never-Night. But you don't. You're a Sundowner."

Sheila's face twisted up as if I'd struck her. She started to whimper: "Please don't..." and for a secko I thought Sheila was going to cry. Then she looked at me different. "I know they scripted your DNA with cultural memories from some actual Australians," she said slowly. "Give me the straight oil, Bodger: do you know what a *sundowner* is?"

The way she said the word, it sounded dirty. "A sundowner?" I asked. "That's someone who lives in Sundown, innit? The central zone of this planet, where the sun rises and sets."

She shook her head. "I guess you don't know, then. Back home in Australia, in the days before the fusion reactors changed the Outback, there was a certain kind of illywhacker."

I knew what *that* word meant. "A con artist, d'you mean? A choof-merchant?"

She nodded. "There were always migrant workers showing up at the bush stations in Queensland and the Red Centre, hoping for a few days' work as sheep-shearers or cattle-drovers. They worked from sun-up to sundown." Sheila's mouth quirked, and those lush green eyes blinked like she was trying not to cry. "There was a certain sort of bloke who would come riding into the stations... looking for work. But he always showed up at *sundown*, when all the stockmen had finished their day's yacker, and the shear-wives were stravaging up the evening meal. Just the right time for a man to sign on for a week's work, then head straight into the showers for a wash-up, then sit down with the other jackaroos and tuck into a bonzer slap-up dinner."

"I see where this is running," I said. "When sun-up came, and it was time to begin a day's work, the sundowner had already scarpered off towards the next station. With a full belly, a good bath, and any other snodger he could blag without earning it."

Sheila nodded. "You called me right when you first met me: *I am* partly aborigine. My mam was from County Wexford in Ireland, but my dad was one of the last blackfellas of the Yagara nation in southeast Queensland. Actual, he was part Yagara and part Ananga...and he had some whitefella blood too, so he couldn't get a shareholding on the tribal lands set aside by the Council, in the ceremony-country of the last aboriginal clans. I grew up in my mam's and dad's four-wheel drive. They went from one bush-station to the next, always lookin' for work. We humped our blueys on the wallaby trail: always movin' from one place to the next."

Sheila's voice wasn't so posh now. "My dad got work in season at the sheep-stations, as a shearer, until the Oracle robots and the Slamp machines made sheep-shearing a mechanised process. He did some work as a drover, too. Then he rode in the very last brumby muster, rounding up the Outback's last remaining wild horses. My mam worked hard too, as a cook or a jillaroo at any station that would have us. But most of them wouldn't have us."

Sheila's lower lip was trembling. "D'you know how hard it

was for my dad to get work in the last days of the old Outback? There weren't jobs enough, so the station-masters could pick and choose their stockmen...and they wouldn't hire a blackie, or even a half-blood. They called my dad some daggy names just for bein' a blackie, and they called my mam even daggier names for bein' a white lass who *married* a blackie. It was worst for us at sundown. Everywhere we went, if my parents showed up lookin' for work at *sunset*, the boss cockies wouldn't even give a listen: they just figured my dad was a sundowner, looking to cheat them. So my parents and I would sleep out in the scrub at night, under the Southern Cross and the stars. We had to show up for every job straight at dawn, or just after breakfast, so my dad and my mam could put in a full day's hard yacker to prove they were honest. Even then, we were thin on job offers. There were kids on the stations sometimes: white boys and girls my own age, but they always dagged me because I was one-fourth blackfella. They called me a dingo, and asked if I'd show them my tail." Sheila's lip quivered again. "One time, when I was nine years old, my dad brought us to a cattle station in late May: too soon for the calving season and too late for the droving. My mam said we'd have less than Buckley's chance of finding work in the off-season...but when we got to the station, everyone was nice to us straight off. All the station kids wanted to be cobbers with me, even though they could see I was mixed-blood. And I thought...oh, I thought *at last* we'd found a place where my mam and my dad and I could just stop our sundownin', and put down some roots like other folk. Then I rumbled that we'd shown up on May twenty-sixth."

"Reconciliation Day," I said, remembering the annual holiday from when I was a lad growing up in Saint Kilda Road, Melbourne. "In honour of Australia's indigenous people."

Sheila nodded again. "They gave us dinner and some clean beds. Then the next morning – when it wasn't Recko Day anymore, and nobody had to be nice to the nig-nogs till same time next year – they told us there weren't any jobs for my dad, nor my mam either. And the kids called me names as my dad drove us out." Sheila trembled, clenching her fists. "It was always on, like that. It got worse just before my eleventh birthday, when I started to *develop*. Breasts, and that."

I didn't understand everything that Sundowner Sheila was saying...because it had to do with what it's like to be *human*. Nothing to do with compozzies like me. "What you called me before: a *loobrah*," Sheila said now. "I know you didn't mean it: it's just a scrap of some dead bastard's memory that the lab-cookies scripted into your skull. You likely don't even know what the word means." Her lips tightened. "Well, don't think I've not been called that before. Once I started to develop, the stockmen at every station commenced to crying me a loobrah. That's a word white men use for any aboriginal woman who..."

"Don't tell me," I said, because I could see it hurt her to remember.

"Anyroad," she said, "I've always thought of sundown as a *dishonest* time. At the bush-stations, if my father had a chance of getting work at all, he had to show up early in the morning. If we showed up at sundown, everyone decided straight off that we were thieves." Now Sheila raised her head, and looked straight past me at the alien sun. "After my parents died, I emigrated here to DP2 – I mean, Delta Pavonis Two – and I got a job in this planet's central libration zone, working with the crews who come through from Centauri on their way to terraforming New Australia. I like it there in the central zone, when the sun rises over this planet's horizon. Sometimes I work in the Everdark zone, on the far end of the

world, where it's always night. The only time of day I'll never like –" she shuddered "– is *sundown*. Sundown's the dishonest time of day for me. Sundowns always make me feel...*dirty*."

I wasn't paying much attention to that last bit she'd said, because Sheila had said something else that had made me take notice. Summat about sleeping under the stars, in the bush. "D'you remember *night*?" I asked. "Night in Australia?"

"Yes, I do," she said softly. She looked at the thingo in her hand – the cybernetic memory downloader – and then she looked at me and smiled. "Would you like to see nightfall?" she asked. "Night in the Australian outback?"

I nodded. "Turn round, then," she said. Sheila pointed over my shoulder, towards a random portion of the sky. "Earth's solar system is *there*, in the sky: eighteen light-years away. You can't see it in this everlasting daylight. But I can show you the night sky on Earth. Turn round, and close your eyes."

I closed my eyelids, all of them, and I felt Sheila's hand at the back of my neck, soft and cool. The touch of her hand at the base of my skull, against the subdermal implant, made all the different voices in my head go sudden quiet. I felt a click in my brain, and I wondered which of the two indicators she'd activated on her memory downloader: the *red* blinking light, or the *green* one.

I could still see the networks of red lines inside my eyelids, where the copper sunlight of Delta Pavonis was pouring through my blood-vessels. I could feel the hot desert wind on my face, and a few crabflies buzzing at my eyelids. Now the red became brown, and then black. I felt a cool breeze, and the crabflies went away.

Now I saw little pricklies of light in the cool dark. They got brighter, and I realised that all the little lights were *stars*. I'd heard about stars, and sometimes I'd tried to imagine how they looked. Now I was fair dinkum *seeing* them.

"Over *there*," Sheila breathed, "*to the left*." And I knew where she was pointing in my mind. With my eyes closed, I turned my visual perception leftwards, to the region of the starscape she was showing me. "*Those are Alpha and Beta Centauri. Back home in Australia we call 'em the Pointers, because they point the way across the sky towards the Southern Cross. There it is: to the right of Centauri, just above the Magellanic Clouds.*" I could see five stars shining blue-white and cold. Four stars in the shape of a cross: the long upright, the narrower cross-beam, and a smaller fifth star near the centre. "*That smudgey bit near Alpha Crucis, at the foot of the cross, is the Coal Sack Nebula.*" Sheila whispered, and now I saw it.

"My father's people called it Warluwaru," Sheila whispered into my left ear. "*From ancient times, they believed the Southern Cross was a footprint in the sky: the left footprint of a giant wedge-tailed eagle. The Coal Sack is the eagle's nest, and the Pointers of Centauri shape the throwing-stick of an ancient warrior who hunted the eagle. And that star high and over, see there? That's Delta Pavonis. It's only a few light-years from Earth, but you can't see it from America or Europe, because Pavonis is only visible from Earth's southern sky. So you can see it from Australia. When I was a little girl, and the first United Nations expedition landed on Pavonis Two and named it Terra Nova, my mother told me that Delta Pavonis is Australia's lucky star...cos it can only be seen from Down Under.*"

I could feel Sheila's lips next to my left ear, brushing gently against the sensitive membranes of my earlids. I was surprised that a lush lady like Sheila could put her human mouth near my compozzie earlids without feeling dirty. "My favourite time in the Outback was always at night," Sheila whispered. "When my

parents made a campsite under the stars, and my dad told me about Warluwaru and his people's other legends. But my mother taught me about the clock inside the Cross." Sheila's voice changed tone, and turned excited and eager. I kept my eyes closed, while she asked: "Did you know you can use the Southern Cross to tell time?"

"No," I whispered, afraid that if I spoke aloud the stars would go out, and I would have to open my eyes, and the permanent noon would return. "Tell me how to do it. Show me."

Inside my mind, Sheila guided my vision. *"That star there, at the top of the Southern Cross: Gamma Crucis, y'see? Now pretend the Cross is the hour hand of a 24-hour clock. On Earth, at midnight on the first day of April – autumn in Australia – the clock is right-way up, and the Southern Cross points straight up to midnight. Every hour of the day on April first, the Southern Cross points to the time like a sundial: so, at six o'clock in the morning – when the day's one-fourth over – the Southern Cross has moved ninety degrees along the 24-hour clock, and so on. It works all the year round, but you have to keep rotating the clock so that midnight moves thirty degrees anti-clockwise for the first day of each month after April...plus one degree for each day in the month. Once you know where the top of the clock is, you can always use the Southern Cross to tell the time."*

All the blokes inside my head were trembling with excitement now, even though most of them weren't cluey enough to understand much of this. I could feel Sheila's lips near my earlids, and I could feel one of her breasts pressing into my left arm. Felt nice, it did. Suddenly I felt something go hard in my south paddock, deep in my donger. I got toey and embarrassed, and I hoped that Sheila wouldn't notice. I kept my eyes tight shut, for fear that if I opened my eyes the nightfall in my mind would go away and bring back the hot noon forever. "What time is it now?" I asked Sundowner Sheila.

"What time would you like it to be?" she asked me.

"Any time except noon," I whispered.

"Any time except sundown, for me," Sheila said. "All right, fair do's: we'll make it halfway 'tween noon and sunset. Four o'clock in the afternoon, say. Time for a tea-break and a smoko, back home in Oztralia."

"And what day is it now?" I asked her.

"Back on Earth? Just now it's mid-November," Sheila answered.

"The beginning of the outback's Long Wet...when the rains come, and the dry cracks in the desert's saltpan start to heal, and water turns the dust to honest soil again. When the green things return."

I shuddered, and moaned, as I felt the soft rain pattering against my face and hands. It never rains on DP2, but now I was home in Australia. I could see it now, behind my eyes. Not the red alien desert of DP2's Evernoon sector...but the real scrub, the honest bush, the dinkum Outback of Australia. I could see the vast termite mounds rising up from the sand, taller than a man and forming long eerie processions north to south, in alignment with Earth's magnetic poles. I saw the trees of the Australian desert: the bloodwoods, the red gums, the kurrajong scrub, and a thick stand of twisting boabs. I saw a ghostgum, tall and spidery, with its dead-white bare limbs. I was here. I was home.

"Bodger!" roared a voice from somewhere outside my head, near the dunny-shack. "Bodger, y' lazy skivin' bastid!" yelled Dicko, and I reckoned that his indoctrination download was finished.

I opened my eyes. Dicko came running past Sheila, and he reached up as high as he could and smacked me on the forehead. "You tryin' to bail up the lady, you troggo?" he snarked. "Get back to work, Bodger: start diggin' the lines for them irrigation crystals. I'll tell yer when t' stop. Move it!"

Dicko walked past me and whispered something to Sheila, and I shut my earlids quick so I wouldn't hear what he said...but I saw her look at him and smile, and then she looked at me and laughed. Then the two of them walked back to Dicko's shanty, holding hands, and they left me there all on my Pat Malone.

I fetched my shovel, and looked up at the sun to see what time it was now: just on noon. I figured I'd work till sundown, and then take a rest. I couldn't stand the crabflies much longer than that. While I worked, I kept thinking of Sheila...but her face and her voice had gone all blurry in my memory.

Only I still remembered how I felt when she had touched me, and her touch made all the voices in my brain stop whispering. And I remembered her green eyes. My memory had lost her face, but I didn't want to lose her eyes. I wanted to remember those green eyes after Sheila had left this damned nightless planet and she was on a starship going home to Australia. I wanted to keep her green eyes in my pocket, like bright shiny opals, forever.

noon. I couldn't work any more, and my head felt too full. The crabflies were huzzabuzzing worse than ever.

I went back to my gundy hut, and closed the door. I stripped off. Then I set up my little piece of mirror, and looked at myself naked.

I didn't know what I was looking for. Sheila fancied Dicko better'n she liked me. I wanted her to look at me with them green eyes, the way she'd looked at Dicko. I wanted her to make me feel all them nice things she'd made me feel before, plus a long coo-ee farther and longer. I remembered that little happy scream I'd heard Sheila make, when she was inside Dicko's shanty with him. I wanted her to make that happy scream for me.

I heard a jouncer gunning its engine. I ran out of my hut, just in time to get hit in my gob with a funnel of sand as the jouncer choofed away. I could just catch a squizz of Sheila Kooranda at the controls, her long dark hair flying behind her as she squonked the horn and waved good-bye to someone. She wasn't waving to me. I shut my earlids to keep the sand out, but just as I shut 'em I heard Sheila's voice above the roar of the jouncer. She was calling out "Hooroo!" That's an abo word: it means good-bye.

I walked across the compound, ignoring the burning-hot sand under my bare feet. Whenever anything hurts, I just let one of the other blokes in my head take the pain. I found Dicko hunched

I must have worked all morning. By the time I'd clocked off, it was



over one of my grade trenches. He was poking the sand with some high-tech gazinta. "Where's Sheila away to?" I asked him.

Dicko lifted his head. Soon as he saw me, he laughed fit to kill. Now I remembered I was naked. Dicko had seen me in the nick before, and it usually made him laugh, but he'd never laughed this hard before. "Holy dooley!" he yelled. "Bodger, y' jammy bastard! You've cracked a woody, mate! Yer've managed to awaken your bacon!"

I didn't know what he was on about. Then I looked down and saw my donger standing up.

Dicko was yawping like a jackass. "Bloody oath, Bodge! I've never seen yer trouser-truncheon get so big before! And hark at the shape on him! You've got a wankstaff shaped like the Sydney Opera House!"

Dicko had laughed at me before, but this time I didn't feel like taking it. "Don't have a lend of me, lad," I tells him, quiet-like.

"They must've compozzed your beef-bayonet that shape, back to Sundown," says Dicko, still laughing. "Likely the lab-cookies scripted yer DNA deliberate, so you'd come out of the brew-vat with ridges on yer dangler."

"Dicko," I says. "Don't you laugh at me, mind. You're not so crash hot, yerself."

"One thing's a dead cert," says Dicko, still laughing while he cops a look between my legs. "You'll never stir the possum with *that* stonker! The last turkey in the shop, it looks like! Any woman who claps her dekko on that giblet of yours would cark herself!"

Dicko stood up and unbuttoned his daks, and he whipped out his panhandle. "Have a Captain Cook at *this*, then, Bodger-melad!" Dicko yawped, while he stroked his piss-python. "Got the personal approval of Sheila Kooranda from Sundowner, it has! She was gaggin' for it! I might be only a brew-born compozzie, but you reckon I've got what it takes to root a human lady's goodies. She even got my back wheels in!"

When Dicko started dobbling Sheila's name that way, it fair did my head in. I wanted to say something to make Dicko stop big-noting himself...but Dicko's smarter than me, and no matter what I say he always knows how to top-clever me. Now he turned his back to me, and he sat down by the grade trench. And I saw that the trench made a long narrow hole in the sand, just the right size to bury a long narrow man like Dicko Longjack.

As I came up behind Dicko in the sunlight, I saw something metal and shiny on the back of his neck. Dicko had one of Sheila's downloaders attached to the woggle at the base of his skull. The *subdermal implant*, someone reminded me. The little indicator thingo in the downloader was blinking a little *green* light, so I knew that Dicko was listening to summat that Sheila had given him. I was all burred up that she'd given the downloader to *him*, not to me.

Somebody in my head was chanting a song, but I couldn't get all the words. Something about mad dogs and umpty-tump go out in the midday sun.

I circled round in front of Dicko. He was sitting cross-legged with his arms folded and his eyelids closed: all four of them. On the ground by the irrigation trench was a disk-deck perched on a little hill of sand. The disk-deck had two clips for holding downloaders. One clip was empty: Dicko had taken the downloader. The other was still in its clip. There were *two* downloaders, so that meant Sheila wanted me and Dicko *both* to hear whatever was on the disk. Dead rotten of Dicko to cop it all for himself instead of going shares with me.

I took the other downloader out of its clip, and straight off when

I touched it the indicator went on. Green, bright lovely green it was. I put the downloader behind my neck and put it up against the woggle in my *click* **CODE ERROR** *types of surface irrigation are the furrow, border check, cutback and contour methods* **CODE ERROR** **INTERFACE ERROR** *objectives of the irrigation cycle are to minimise runoff, minimise deep percolation* **CODE ERROR** *maximise storage, maximise distribution uniformity...*

Something berko. The woman with the plummy voice was in my head again, yabbering at me with all her **ERROR ERROR** **download intended for primary unit not compatible with subordinate's implant** **SYSTEM FAILURE**

I opened all eight of my eyelids. Eight? No; I'd only got four. But where did I get extra eyes ouch a man in front of me I saw Dicko shouting at me Bodger bastard Bodger stupid son of a *four phases of an irrigation event are advance, storage, depletion, recession*. I stood up and opened my eyes and saw Bodger standing in front of me no wait I'm **INTERFACE ERROR** I'm Bodger then who am I looking at where's Dicko *as primary composite humanoid for this sector, your cybernetic implant will receive hydrodynamic equations for flow rate and flow area during each phase of the irrigation event...*

My head was shonked. I was looking down at Dicko standing in front of me, and I could hear him dagging me, but at the same time I was looking up from Dicko's head and I saw *me*, Bodger, my own self standing in front of me while I heard Dicko's voice coming out of my head only it was Dicko's head and I were inside it and the plummy-voiced bitch telling me *across a contour grid created during the advance phase...*

My brain's too crowded. Bodger and me no I'm Bodger he's Dicko in each other's heads seeing hearing each other's sightsoundfeel **ERROR** and him in my brain and I'm inside his head seeing me seeing him through each other's eyes **REBOOT** and I want it to stop. I grabbed Dicko's throat with both my hands all four thumbs what the hell are you doing Bodger stop it Bodger we were both same **ERROR** I was in two bodies different at both I could feel my hands round my own throat as I strangled him saw myself seeing me *Preissmann double-sweep irrigation technique at the recession front of your water table* saw Dicko's eyes bug out saw my own eyes through Dicko's eyes can't breathe can't breathe can't bloody breathe and all the bastards in my head are shouting do it do it do it **SYSTEM FAILURE** dead.

And then one of us died and I thought it was me but then I knew it was him. And then I was alone in my head except for some Lady Muck bitch telling me about *Kostiakov infiltration equation for the micro-irrigation* so I reached up and unplugged the thingo that was downloading her into my woggle and gone.

I crushed the downloader in my fingers as I pulled it off the back of my skull, and I flung away the fraggy bits. Then I saw Dicko lying in the grade trench, with his neck bent all shonky. He had one eye half-shut: its outer eyelids were open, and I could see his inner pair of eyelids underneath. His other eye had all four eyelids open, and I saw Dicko's dead eye staring up at me all jaked from in the irrigation trench.

"Well, Bodger, you gobshite," says Dicko's voice, but his dead mouth hung open, "*you've well and truly blued it up this time, and no mistake.*"

"Belt up, Dicko," I tells him. "And hold yer guts. You can't talk any more. You've carked it. You're dead. I hear you grizzling, but you're just a... what's the word, then? You're just an illusion, you are."

"Am I fuck!" says Dicko's voice, from somewhere in between my

ears and right behind my eyes. "You've been duded, my lad. Fact, you've duded yerself. You oughtn't have interfaced your memory implant and mine, through two downloaders runnin' the same file. You've set up a feedback loop, and..."

"Get out of my head!" I yelled, grabbing a shincracker stone and bashing myself in the skull to make Dicko stop talking.

"Get out? Not likely, Bodger lad," said Dicko in my skull. "I've got nowhere else to go, now that you've carked me. You've uploaded me into your brain, Bodger. So I've set up housekeeping in your noggin: it's my head too now, I reckon. We're mates, you and me: we share everything."

I dropped the stone, grabbed a bigger one, and started jobbing it against my forehead to give Dicko the flick, but he kept talking: "We share everything, I mean...except Sheila Kooranda. I've had her, Bodger, and you haven't. But I guess you've uploaded all my memories into yer head. So now you remember havin' a naughty with her, same as I do."

Dicko chuckled, and then suddenly I saw summat inside my head: *someplace I remembered where I'd never been before.*

Suddenly I was inside Dicko's shanty...even though I'm too big to fit inside it. I was standing in Dicko's shack, near his bed, and Sheila from Sundown was standing next to me. She was smiling at me, just the same way I'd seen her smiling at Dicko. *I was remembering this, even though it had never happened...never happened to me, at least.* Sheila was shucking off her clobber. She dropped her clothes on the floor of Dicko's shack and she beckoned me towards her, and I remembered looking at her naked, and being surprised and thinking to myself: "So that's what a woman looks like without her

FILE ERROR

"That's one of my memories downloaded into your brain, but I don't think I'll share it with you, Bodger," says Dicko's voice in my skull. "Have another, instead." Suddenly I wasn't in Dicko's shanty anymore. I was floating in something salty, like water but thicker. I was naked, inside a big clear vat, with salty liquid filling my throat and my lungs but I didn't drown because I wasn't breathing. Several humen and huwomen stared at me through the wall of the vat. "Welcome home, Bodger," Dicko whispered in my brain. "I remember this room, but you don't. This is where you and I were brewed up. It's the amniotic tank in the genome lab, at Sundown."

Through the vat, I heard one of the lab-women talking to the other humans in a posh voice: "I still maintain it's a mistake to script the genome of the male primary composite to emit pheromones that trigger female sexual arousal."

"We discussed this during the prototype phase," said a lab-man. "The pheromones are necessary to..."

Suddenly I was back in the red desert, back in Evernoon, standing

next to the grade trench and Dicko's corpse lying nearby with one eye shut, one eye half-open, in a stuck wink. I'd never killed anybody before, and I didn't know what to do next. I decided to go take a crap.

I went to the dunny and had a good long shite. While I was wiping the dags off my arse, I noticed a cabinet on one wall of the dunny-shed. I'd seen that cabinet before, but I'd never opened it nor wondered what it was for. It had always been Dicko's lurk, not mine. But now I *knew* why it was there. I pulled up my grundies and my daks, and I opened the cabinet: inside it was a bucket of charcoal and a scoop. The scoop was right enough for Dicko's hands but too small for mine, so I picked up the bucket and I shook a few wodes of charcoal down into the dunny-hole, to cover my own shite.

"Good on yer, Bodger m'lad," said Dicko's voice in my skull. "The charcoal will mix up with yer turds down there in the dunny-pit, and it'll sort out the carbon-nitrogen ratio. Let it aerate and do some composting. Good for this planet's ecology, it is."

I put the charcoal bucket back in the cabinet, whilst I wondered why I'd never needed any charcoal for all the other times I took a crap. And straight off, Dicko answered in my brain: "You never noticed it before because you never needed to. It's always been my job to maintain the compost at this duty station. Now that you've killed me, you nerk, from now on the composting will be your job. Fact, now that you've carked me, everything hereabouts will be your job."

I went outside, to where I'd left Dicko's corpse. In the sky overhead, it was noon. I just now caught wise: it's *always* been noon. It bloody *always* will be noon.

I looked at Dicko, dead Dicko. *That's me down there*, said the part of my head where Dicko was hiding, as something clicked in the back of my skull. And now suddenly I was clued-up and brainy in a way I'd never been before...and suddenly I knew one bloody hell of a lot about irrigation and terraforming.

"Time to get back to work, Bodger," says somebody in my head, who was Dicko and me both together. "Compozies like us, we're hard-wired to do the job we were brewed up for, no matter what. Let's be at it, then."

I fetched my jack-knife, and I cut up Dicko's corpse like curried mutton. It was daggy work, because I kept thinking I was Dicko and this was my own body dead, and I was chopping up my own arms and legs and face. *You're me and both of us are you from now on*, Dicko said in my head as I cut up myself I mean him.

I buried his bits in the desert, deep into the sand: way down where the root zone will be when I'd done irrigating. I spread the dead bits of Dicko all round, to fertilise as much of this planet's soil as possible. Then I took a sonic shower to wash off the blood. By the time I'd finished, it was noon...but now I knew why.

I kept working. That's my job, and that's what I'm programmed

to do. Now I was Bodger and Dicko double-bunking in one brain, but I still knew my job. I dug the grade trenches, and I established a root zone and I laid the potassium polymer crystals for water retention. I calculated the flow rate and flow area, and got ready to beam the telemetry to the Terraform Division's comsat overhead...

so the human administrators at Sundown, in the planet's libration zone, could confirm my hydrodynamic equations.

But now it got complicated. The telemetry transceiver was inside Dicko's shanty. I knew how to use the transceiver, because I was Dicko in my brain, but I couldn't fit through the shanty's

door because I was Bodger in my body. So I tore down the shanty wall, and went in. I found the transceiver and switched it on, same as Dicko remembered. But my hands were too big for the keyboard, with not enough fingers and too many thumbs. So then I just went berko, and I smashed the fucker. Straight oath I've got Bodger's temper even though I've got Dicko's cluey bits.

I kept working, trying to team up Dicko's cleverness with Bodger's strength and stamina. It was hard yacker now, harder than ever, because now I remembered all the aggro I'd kept forgetting before.

I know there's nowt to eat except bricks of dried nutrients, all the same flavour: artificial curried mutton. Curried mutton for brekkie, curried mutton for lunch. Curried bloody damned mutton at eight-hour intervals. When I got thirsty and I wanted a coldie, I knew there wasn't any such a thing. All I had was somebody else's memory of drinking a cold beer: the lab-cookies who designed me had compozzed my brain so it would activate the sense-memory of a cold beer every time I got thirsty.

I kept working, doing two men's jobs. I was the primey and the subbo, both together. Sometimes I had to operate some complicated piece of donk – one of Dicko's gazintas – that was too high-tech for me to rumble, or too complicated for my big thumby hands. Whenever I had to operate some machine that I couldn't understand, I just smashed it. Sometimes we'd talk to myself as I worked. Mostly I thought about Sheila Kooranda. The Dicko part of me didn't want to talk about her, but he remembered being with her in his shanty. Bodger's memories and Dicko's memories were knotted all together with the memories of all the dead men's DNA in Bodger's composite genetic template. I remembered Sheila from Sundown smiling at me and reaching out to touch me in the dark inside my shanty, with the windows closed to keep out all that perishing sunlight...but that was Dicko's memory, not mine.

I kept track of the time now. I didn't want to, but some part of Dicko's mind was scripted to keep track of time in a place where it's always noon...and now this part of him was click-a-ticking inside my skull. I knew sooner or later somebody from the Terraform Division would show up with our next supply drop, and they'd ask where Dicko was. I didn't know what I'd tell them. I kept my knife handy.

About three months after my brains got all shonked, I saw a funnel of dustcloud coming on the horizon. A jouncer, you reckon. I got my knife, and stood ready. The jouncer choofed into the middle of the compound, and a woman got out.

It was Sheila from Sundown. She was wearing her sun-dress, and her hat, and a pair of sunglasses. And those deadset sexy boots. Now I twigged that she looked a bit different: her moon tan was gone, and her complexion was darker. Then I noticed her breasts had got bigger and firmer, and their tips were standing up against her dress.

"Nipples," said a dead bloke in my head...and suddenly I knew what nipples were. "Holy dooley, cop a line on the size of her charlie dimmocks," said a man inside my headache. "She's smuggling peanuts, she is. They're like chapel hatpegs!" Her breasts had grown, too right, but all the rest of Sheila was slim and elegant and thin.

Sheila clutched her hat with one hand, and ran towards me. "Bodger! Where's Dicko?" she called out. "The boss cookies in Sundown haven't received any telemetry from this irrigation outpost for the past three months. That's Dicko's yacker: where is he?"

Where was Dicko? I started to point all round the compound: at the desert, at the dunes. But then I stopped and raised one hand – my right 'un, because I'm right-handed just now – and my hand tapped both its thumbs against my forehead.

"Dicko's in *here*, Sheila," I said. "I'm sorry. I only meant to cark him, not to upload him into my head."

Sheila made a little gaspy noise, but didn't speak. She touched her flat belly, and she looked round the desert as if she was trying to see Dicko's dead bits. Then she took an indicator thingo off her belt, and put it to the woggle on the back of my neck. I tried to tell her how I'd killed Dicko, but she shushed me and took the indicator away from my neck. Then she lifted her sunglasses, and she squizzed a readout panel on the indicator.

"Strike a light!" said Sheila. "That's never happened to composite humanoids before! You and Dicko must have both been downloading the same indoctrination disk into your implants when you topped him."

"That's it," I said, and started crying. My brain was too heavy, with too many dead men inside it.

"*Poor Frankenstein*," said Sheila Kooranda. She put her arms around me, but I was too big: she could only reach partway round. "*Poor shattered golem. Poor patchwork man.*" She reached up to wipe the tears from my eyes. I made a mental note to recycle my tears. That's part of my job, innit? Collect waste moisture, and recycle.

"The Terraform Division have denied composite humanoids the legal status of humans," said Sheila softly. "So, technically, you didn't murder a *person*." She looked round nervously. "But I'll have to report this, and I guess the boss cookies will send out another primary composite unit to replace Dicko...very likely another of the same prototype." Sheila sighed. "Too bad. I wanted to see Dicko's face when I..." She stopped. "No. Sod that, Bodger. It's just not on. Now let's get to work."

Sheila unshipped a transceiver from her jouncer's stowhold, and she sent a message to the boss cookies back in Sundown. Then she mucked in, and helped me fix all the donk that I'd smashed and the jobs left undone. Sheila kept glancing at a thingo on her wrist, and she kept yabbering that she'd never meant to stay here so long, and she had to go back to Sundown, and all. I didn't stop her from leaving, but somehow she stayed. I was glad.

We worked through three days of perpetual noon, with time out for zeds and curried mutton. All the time Sheila looked distracted, as if there was something more important than this. Between times, she slept in Dicko's shanty. She strung fly-wire and netting over the hole where I'd torn off a wall.

On the fourth day, we were burying a pipeline when Sheila suddenly clutched her belly, and she moaned: "*Oo-er!* Bodger! Oh, *damn!* I wish Dicko was here. He'd know what to do: this situation was programmed into Dicko's memory. Oh, bloody hell! I want a gyno!"

"Izzat some sort of tool y' want, then?" I asked her.

"No, you boof-brain," Sheila grabbed my arm. "Help me into the shade." She was all red, and perspiring. The hard-wired instincts in my compozzie brain told me to collect Sheila's sweat for recycling, but right now I decided that helping her was more urgent. As gently as I could, I half-walked her, half-carried her to my gundy hut, and lifted the fly-wire. Sheila staggered inside, then collapsed.

"Don't you understand?" she said. She collapsed on my bed, belly-up. "I'm in the club, you great nerker. I'm up the duff! I'm going to drop an ankle-biter...the first child ever born on Delta Pee Two!"

I gawped at her, because I know next-door-to-nowt about human biology. Suddenly one of the dead blokes in my brain showed me a flashback of a she-human with a great vast swollen belly and a human child curled up inside her. Is *that* how women look when

they're preggo? But Sheila from Sundown didn't look that way at all: she hadn't hardly got a belly on her, much.

Sheila was gasping, and biting at the collar of her sun-dress as she tried to unfasten her belt. "Help me, Dicko!" she yelled. "I mean: help me, *Bodger!*" I heard cloth tearing, and then her dress was off. She had some sort of poshy underthings, lady-stuff. I tried to help her pull 'em off, but she just slapped my hands away and stripped down all by herself.

All the men inside my skull were crowding the front of my brain, trying to get a look at naked Sheila. Between amongst them, I heard the cluey smart bloke saying "*Let me through: I'm a doctor.*" So I put away the other minds, and I let him take charge of my brain.

Now I got my first look of a naked woman. She didn't look like I'd expected. Sheila's body was smoother than Dicko's or mine, and her arms and legs were almost hairless. But from the middle of her chest – between her breasts, on past her waist, and right down to the tops of her thighs – she had a thick dark carpet of glossy brown hair. What have women got *that* for?

Sheila moaned, and spread her legs, and between her thighs I saw something red and wet and shiny and small. It was a head, with blind eyes and a whimpering mouth. Two tiny slick red hands emerged next: not like mine, but human hands with four fingers and one thumb apiece. I saw the hands reach out, unguided by the blind eyes, and the fingers grasped two clumps of Sheila's belly-fur. The childling started to climb...

This was all going poddo. The bits of dead men in my head were shouting that children aren't born that way: this child was too small, too undeveloped. "Whose sprog is this, Sheila?" I asked while I steadied her ankles. "I mean it's yours, but..."

"She's Dicko's," said Sheila, gritting her teeth as she moaned. The childling groped its blind way up Sheila's body, hand over hand, clutching her belly fur. I saw the red thing slip and lose its grasp on Sheila's hair, and I reached over to help it. "*Don't touch her!*" screamed Sheila. "*She's got to do it herself!*" Sheila nodded gently as the childling recovered its grip, and made its way towards her breasts.

"You've done this before, have yer?" I asked. Now I saw a horizontal slit in Sheila's chest, half-concealed in her belly-fur beneath the underbulge of her breasts. Sheila put her hands into this slit, and she made some quick convulsive movements as if she was scratching herself from the inside outwards. Now I knew: *she was cleaning her pouch.*

"I've never done this," said Sheila Kooranda, clenching her teeth as her childling clambered towards her pouch and her breasts. "Suh-suh-somehow I know what to do. I...I guess it's been scripted into me, back to Sundown. And I...I can tell my child's a *girl*. She's Dicko's daughter."

The child reached the entrance lips of Sheila's pouch. Sheila cupped her two breasts, held them invitingly towards her childling. I saw the blind child's moist red nostrils twitch. Guided by scent and instinct, the blind childling extended its neck, and its toothless mouth seized the quivering nipple of Sheila's left breast. She gave a yelp – half pain, half proud delight – and she nudged her breast closer to her daughter's mouth, as the half-formed child secured herself inside her mother's pouch.

I stood for a long time, just watching, as Sheila from Sundown nursed her child. She had a smile on her face like she was figjammed in twenty directions. The child had vanished into her pouch, but I saw a steady rippling beneath Sheila's breasts as she nursed her growing child.

I had sussed out the truth. "So you're not really Sheila Kooranda," I said, as I looked for a pillow. "There never *was* any Sheila Kooranda from Queensland."

"No, there is...or there *was*," Sheila said. I propped a pillow underneath her head, and just then I felt one of my thumbs touch something hard behind Sheila's neck: a subdermal implant at the base of her skull, nearly hidden in her long hair.

She had a *woggle*. She'd always had one.

"The Terraform Division brewed a new template," Sheila explained, while she smiled towards the rippling bulge in her pouch. "The first few genotypes designed for this planet's environment were all males, with composite memories from several dead humans. When the geneticists crafted a female template, they changed their strategy: they decided to copy a complete set of memories from one human source." Sheila lifted her head, and she looked at me with those lovely green eyes. "I hadn't lied to you, Bodger...at least, I didn't *know* I was telling a furphy. There really was a Sheila Kooranda. She was a half-blood aboriginal girl, born in Queensland before the humans had any off-Earth colonies. I don't know where or how she died; they didn't script that part into my memory. Everything I told you...about my parents, and never staying in one place, and living in the Outback...it's all true. But it's all true for Sheila Kooranda. She's who I *thought* I was." Sheila reached into the pouch in her chest, and gently wiped a bit of afterbirth from her suckling child. "Maybe Sheila Kooranda is who I can be, if I try."

I kept my gob shut, and I let Sheila finish: "Y'see, Bodger, the Terraform Division's geneticists brewed me so I wouldn't *know* I'm a prototype female compozzie. When I met you and Dicko three months ago, I thought I was human. The lab cockies brewed my DNA so's I'd respond to the pheromones of a primary-genotype composite male. I couldn't help myself: as soon as I clapped eyes on Dicko, I wanted to have a naughty with him." Sheila smiled. "After Dicko put a bun in my oven, my pregnancy triggered a hormone change that activated a nested memory in my brain. Now I remember that the Terry Divvers designed me this way, so I'd want to breed with male compozzies and start creating a race of little marsupial humanoids...to populate this planet with intelligent life-forms that will terraform it for the human colonists."

I was copping less than half of this. "Marsoopy-thingums?" I asked. "What are they when they're at home, then?"

Sheila's smile got bigger, and her green eyes brightened. "Marsupial compozzies, created from human DNA but redesigned for this planet's desert ecosystem." She reached behind her head, and touched the woggle at the base of her neck. "It's coming back to me, now that I need the information for my daughter's survival. Y'see, in a marsupial reproductive system, all the urogenital organs are configured differently from how they are in placental mammals. My ureters pass directly to my bladder 'tween my oviducts, instead of the lateral arrangement that humans and other placentals have." Sheila winced slightly, and I guessed that her toothless childling was chewing her nipple. "That way, I can store my urine inside a marsupial's impermeable bladder, instead of the permeable system that placental mammals have. The urine becomes concentrated, and I save most of my body's water without losing kidney function."

"You've lost me back there in the bladders, before you got to the kidneys," I said.

Sheila smiled again. "A female marsupial is much better equipped

than a human for living in a desert's ecosystem, because my body doesn't secrete water nearly as fast as a placental human's body would." She looked fondly at her bulging pouch. "Being a marsupial, I give birth to my children while they're still in the foetal stage, after only three months' gestation, and then I nurse them to full gestation: that saves time, and energy, and resources. I can get pregnant again, and drop another sprog – bear another child, I mean – while this lass here is suckling inside my pouch." Sheila pursed her lips, and blew a kiss to her childling. "And aren't you the lucky girl, then?" Sheila said, getting all clucky while she cooed at her child. "I think I'll name you Jillaroo. And I'll give you a little brother soon, you'll see!"

"Will you stay here?" I asked, feeling suddenly hopeful. "I'm thin on taking care of ankle-biters, but I'll help with your child all I can."

Sheila Kooranda shook her head, but she didn't stop smiling. "Naw, Bodger, mate. I can't stay out here in this perishin' place, now that I've got a wean to keep after. Soon as I've rested a bit, I'll be away to Sundown so my little Jillaroo can grow up in a place where the sun rises and sets." She bent her neck forward, and kissed her childling's head poking from the flaps of her pouch. "It's funny, Bodger, innit? When I was a little girl in Australia, out on the wallaby trail with my parents, I always hated sunset...and I always went berko when anyone called us *sundowners*. I swore I'd settle down one day, and I never did. But now I've my own wee lassie to raise, I'll be putting down roots in Sundown...and you reckon I'll be a Sundowner. From here on, I'll be Sundowner Sheila. When nightfall reaches Sundown, I'll hold my daughter up

to the sky and I'll point to the faraway star that's Earth's sun...and I'll tell her all my memories of Queensland." Sheila's mouth went all crook. "Even though I've never actual been there."

"So you've chucked the Terry Divvo, then?" I asked.

Sheila's long brown hair tossed as she shook her head. "Naw, I'll get some job of work at the Terraform Division in Sundown, helping to turn this here planet into Noowoz, or New Oz, or New Oztralyer, or however you cry it. You reckon I'll be a New Australian." She drew up her head and shoulders proudly on the pillow, careful not to disturb her nursing wean. "But I'll be a settler, not a rover. Maybe, if humans and compozzies can settle New Australia together, we'll all be equals when it comes time for setting up the laws."

Just then I heard a loud squonk from the horn of a jouncer outside. "I'll be right back," I told Sheila. As I left her, she was crooning to her wean.

At the far end of the compound, a second jouncer was parked beside Sheila's, and a long thin man was getting out of it. Then he turned. He was *me*. No, I mean...

"*Dicko!*" I said. "But I killed you! I mean..."

"Right, you bastard," the new Dicko told me. "I know the whole drum. The boss cockies in Sundown got Sheila's transmittals, and they've sent me to replace Dicko Longjack. I'm an upgrade composite from the same genetic template."

"Too right, mate," I said. "You and him could be twins. What's yer name, then?"

He gave me both ends of a shonky look. "I thought I'd told yer.



I'm Dicko Longjack. Yes, I'm another one, just like the other one. You can call me the 2.0 version, if that stirs yer possums. How's it been hangin' here since I carked it?"

I told Dicko about all the work I'd done and all the high-tech gazintas I'd smashed since he'd died. And then I told him about the headaches I was getting, from carryin' two sets of brains in one skull, and not knowin' if I was Bodger or Dicko or both at the same go, or somebody else. And then I told him that this place was drivin' me troppo, what with nowt to eat but curried mutton, and nowt to drink but water rations and some dead bloke's sense-memory of a cold beer. And the perishin' heat, and how it was all so much worse now that I remembered everything and I knew that time was passing, and that.

Dicko took a thingum out of his dungarees and switched it on, and he pressed this to the woggle at the back of my neck. I heard a *click* **REBOOT MEMORY CORE** and then Dicko put the thingum away.

"That'll take a few ticks, but you're sorted. As soon as the reboot finishes, you'll be yer old nong-head self," Dicko said as he peered round the compound. "Now, where's Sheila?"

I nodded towards my gundy hut. I reckoned Sheila would get a surprise when dead Dicko walked in. But I reckoned Sheila had a surprise for Dicko too.

And just now I'd got work to do, finishing the pipeline. I looked up at the sun to see what time it was now: about noon. There was something poddo about that...but I couldn't tell what, so I got back to work. It's always noonday hereabouts, it's always bloody noon.

Froggy MacIntyre was born in Scotland and was one of the thousands of children unwillingly sent to Australia during the 'child migrant' campaign of Britain's postwar government. He now lives half of each year in New York and the other half in Minffordd, North Wales. His work has been widely published in the USA, Britain and elsewhere. More information at <http://members.authorsguild.net/fgmacintyre>

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INTERMISSION

STORIES • THE MACROBE CONSERVATION PROJECT BY CARLOS HERNANDEZ • ILLUSTRATED BY SMS

1 My asiMom was okay. She was like a pillow, a walking talking pillow. But she gave good hugs and smelled right. They did a good job with her: sometimes when she hugged me and I closed my eyes it felt like it's supposed to feel and I forgot that she's not my real mom.

I saw her in the shower a few times. She didn't care. She took showers every day exactly at 5:45PM, even if I messed up every clock in the house, because her inside computer clock was always right. She didn't even need to shower because she was just a robot, but she did anyway. My dad said that that made her more realistic. But if they cared about that, why didn't they give her nipples? Or any hair, except on her head? She didn't even have a butt crack. Sometimes, just when I was forgetting that she wasn't my real mom, I'd remember that she didn't have a butt crack and I'd get a little freaked out.

My dad was – still is, unless they fired him and he didn't tell me – one of the head honchos on the station. He's the lead scientist on the Macrobe Conservation Project. He said that he was the one who wrote all the grants and traveled all the way back to Earth to shake hands with all the jerks in Washington, and so now he was the one in charge, and if Malloy or Grisget or any of those other pieces of *skrak* thought they were going to bone in on his dream, they had another thing coming. He went to work at 6:00 and

got home at 6:00, but they always called him back at night with some big macrobe problem. Sometimes on the speaker I'd hear Dr Malloy or Dr Grisget or one of those other pieces of *skrat* saying, "Don't worry, Lance, this is no big deal. We just wanted you to know. You just have a good time with your kid tonight. We'll handle this." That drove my dad nuts. He waited until they hung up, and then he cussed like crazy at them while he was putting his lab coat back on, and told my asiMom to clean up dinner and make up a plate for him to eat later. Mostly he didn't come back though. Just stayed in the lab all night.

He said that we could cuss all we wanted while we were on the space station, just me and him, but only in Macrolog. Macrolog is the pretend language dad and I made up for the macrobes. It's what the macrobes are thinking whenever scientists are probing them or taking tissue samples or whatever. The whole language is just swear words: *skrat* and *fragbag* and *kikface* and *dunkaballs* and a bunch of others. Almost all of them have the letter k in them. I think my dad thinks the letter k is dirty.

Skrat is my favorite. Dad's too. It sounds the dirtiest. Sometimes I told my asiMom to go *skrat* herself, to see if she'd do anything. But she just kinda looked at me like she didn't get it, and smiled, and then went back to whatever she was doing. Didn't matter, you can't *skrat* without a butt crack anyway.

2 I had an asiBro too who was supposed to be like my brother, but he wasn't like my brother very much. For one thing, they made him a younger brother, and Lance Jr. is my big brother. But they only make younger asiBros. My dad told me that they tried making older asiBros for a while, but that all these little kids were following them around and burning themselves or getting their fingers cut off or getting themselves killed in the dishwasher, because the asiBros didn't know what they were doing and couldn't protect all those dumb little kids from all the dumb stuff they do. I asked dad why they make

asiMoms then, since they're supposed to be substitute moms, but my dad got really serious, the way he always does before he tells a really stupid joke, and said, "Randy, you of all people should know that kids never listen to their parents." Ha ha ha.

The Lance Jr. asiBro was really annoying. He was smaller than me and dumber than me and he followed me around all the time. He was boring, and there was no way to get rid of him. I told my brother about him, and he said, "He sounds just like you!" I called him a *skratclown* and I didn't tell him what it meant, so he asked my dad and my dad just laughed at him.

3 Summer on the space station was okay, but not as knife as I thought it'd be. I thought it was going to be like space camp, only real. But it wasn't like space camp. It was just real.

The space station was pretty small. And it wasn't really set up for kids. There were places to work and places to eat and rooms to sleep in and places I wasn't allowed to go by myself, like Engineering or the Macrobe Lab. Mostly I just stayed in my room and played video games with my asiBro. And that was kinda *dunkaballs*, because he

was way too good. I can never beat the real Lance Jr., and the Lance Jr. asiBro was a stupid robot with reflexes like you wouldn't believe. And plus, whenever he beat me, he would say, "Good game, Randy! If you would like, I can lower my challenge setting. Would you like me to lower it now?" And yes I would like, but I felt like a *kikface* asking my pretend little robot brother to go easy on me, so I never did. Instead I switched to single-player games and made him watch. He didn't mind. He just sat there and cheered me on.

THE MACROBE CONSERVATION PROJECT

BY CARLOS HERNANDEZ



4 I went to the lab sometimes with my dad. Not a lot, but sometimes. There wasn't a lot for me to do there anyway. All I could do is look but don't touch.

It was still pretty knife. It looked like a morgue, probably because of all the dead people. The center of the labs had sixteen incubators with sixteen dead people lying in them. You couldn't actually see the dead people, because the incubators weren't see-through, I guess so the scientists didn't have to stand there looking at dead people all day.

The incubators weren't for the dead people, because if you're dead, there's nothing to incubate. The incubators were really for the macrobes. The cadavers – that's what my dad liked me to call the dead people – were the hosts for the macrobes. So really they had two incubators: the real incubators, and then the dead people.

It seemed like a lot of work to keep those things from going extinct. I didn't get it at first. I mean, why would you want to protect animals – if you can even call them animals, since they look like blobs of Jell-O that were made with toilet water – that will also take over your brain the first chance they get? So I asked my dad one day. Actually, I told him maybe New Hope would be better off without macrobes. "I mean, the less things that will eat your brain, the better, right?" I said.

He got real serious. I could tell because he stopped eating. The *skrat* on his fork started dripping through the tines, but he just held it in the air, because he had turned into Professor Dad and it was time for a really long science lesson: "Randy, we're the outsiders. We're the guests of New Hope. We came here because we did a really good job of *fragbagging* our own planet and are going to need to move everybody off of it in the very near future. And now that we're getting a second chance, you think the first thing we should do is just start killing off species left and right?"

"No," I said. I was staring at the *skrat* on his fork. It kind of looked like a macrobe.

"We've only been here a very short while, and already we know that the macrobes are an essential part of the planet's ecosystem. There's a certain type of tree on the planet called a 'brain tree' that needs the macrobes in order to live. Maybe other trees do too, we don't know. But trees give us the oxygen we need to breathe on New Hope, just like they did on Earth. It wouldn't be smart to start killing off all the trees, would it?"

"No."

I'd said no twice already, but once you get my dad going on macrobes, there's no stopping him. "And anyway, macrobes are one of the most interesting life forms we've ever discovered, Randy. Certainly the most advanced parasites we've ever seen."

And then I saw a way to ask him about the knifest thing about macrobes: the dead people. "Yeah, I don't get that. How can they be parasites? Doesn't the host of a parasite have to be alive? I think they're more like scavengers."

He looked at me like I had *skrat* coming out of my nose. He finally ate his forkful of macrobe and said, "That is a very perceptive thing to say, Randy. Did you think of that yourself?"

And I said, "Yeah, Dad. I'm not stupid."

And he said, "Hey kiddo, that's not what I meant! But no, technically, the macrobes are parasites. See, they're not just eating up the bodies they inhabit, like a scavenger would. They're actually preserving it! They get inside a dead body and spread throughout the nervous system, and they get everything working again, almost like the body has come back to life! That's hardly the

behavior of a scavenger, right?"

And I said, "Yeah. But then it's like they're not really parasites either. They're symbiotic. They help their host, so they're not just mooching off of it like a leech."

I could tell he was impressed that I knew what symbiotic meant. And then he said, "Well, they don't *really* help out their host, because the host is dead, and it stays dead. And, if you put a macrobe in a live human, well, believe me, you'd know it was a parasite! Eventually it would spread through your entire nervous system, go up your spine, and take over your brain, just like you said. But with a cadaver, it doesn't matter if a macrobe takes over the brain, because the cadaver isn't using it anyway."

"What happens when the macrobe takes over the brain?"

"In a cadaver, not much, because we sever a lot of the neuromuscular connections to avoid complications." He gave me a weird look before he kept going. "In theory, though, a macrobe could take over enough to...move a human body around, maybe."

"And make it walk and talk again? Like the living dead?"

My dad was laughing. "No, not like the 'living dead.' Where do you come up with this stuff? You think this space station is going to turn into a zombie movie?"

"That'd be so knife."

"Yes, very knife. But to answer your question...I can't answer your question. We don't know exactly what happens. That's exactly what we're trying to find out here."

I scooped up some of my macrobe-*skrat* with my fork and let it hang in the air for a minute and stared at it and watched it drip through the fork-teeth. And then I asked my dad, "Dad, why did we have to come to this space station?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, why couldn't you do your experiments with the macrobes on New Hope? Why'd we have to go all the way to outer space?"

My dad got a big, crooked smile on his face and leaned back in his chair and put his hands behind his head. "I'll tell you, Randy. But this has to be a secret between us."

"Okay."

"The reason we're on this space station is because none of the brand-new nations on New Hope have the *dunkaballs* to say that they are letting me stick macrobes into cadavers on their soil. Sure, they want me to save the ecosystem and bring the macrobes back from the brink of extinction, just as long as I shoot myself into orbit to do it!"

And just when things were getting good, those *fragbags* Malloy and Grisget called with another *skrat* problem they were having. So my dad left and I helped my asiMom clear dinner. After we finished, she said, "You are a good son." And then she added, "If you would like me to increase the amount of praise I give you, please say 'Increase praise' at any time."

5 I don't even know why I have to be here. I'm not crazy. I know my dad thinks I'm crazy, but I think he's crazy, so we're even. I'm not a 'danger to myself and others.' I got that off of my chart. I don't know who wrote that, but it's not true. When I was on the space station I only got in trouble twice in the whole summer. And the first one wasn't even that big a deal. I just used a nailgun without permission. On my asiBro.

Why did they have a nailgun in a space station anyway, if it's so dangerous? They shouldn't have just left it lying around either. How

was I supposed to know? It was just there, in Engineering, and okay, I wasn't supposed to be in there, but it's not like they locked the door or anything, and the nailgun was just there. And I didn't take it for that long either. I just wanted to see what it could do.

But you can't use a nailgun on anything in a space station. Everything's so breakable. It's not like there was any wood or anything I could've used.

So I took it back to my apartment. I didn't need my asiMom for anything, so I told her to go recharge, and she did. And then I told my asiBro to come over.

He came over and said, "That is a nailgun." He was always identifying things, like I was some sort of *kikface*.

And I said to him, "Hold out your hand." And he did, and I shot him between the knuckles with the nailgun. The nail went in maybe a centimeter before it hit metal. The asiBro said, "Ow that hurt," but I could tell it didn't. He still had the same happy idiot look on his face, and he didn't even try to pull it out.

So I shot him a few more times. Okay, a lot more times. It was really funny. He just kept saying, "Ow that hurt Ow that hurt Ow that hurt Ow that hurt" in the same normal voice over and over. It didn't matter where I shot him: face, stomach, foot, chest, knee, or right in the *dunkaballs*. I just heard the little metal ping, and he'd say, "Ow that hurt" and just stand there waiting to get shot again.

That was the day I discovered that when an asiBot is getting damaged, it calls the owner's phone to let them know what's happening. It's a safety feature, so that, if your kid's with the asiBot, you can go save your kid or something. I didn't know they did that, or else I wouldn't have shot him full of nails.

My dad busted into the apartment out of breath and looking really scared. I know he was really worried about me, but I wasn't doing it for attention. I didn't know my *fragbag* pretend brother was going to call him and nark me out. Well anyway, my dad didn't stay scared long. He was too busy getting really really angry.

6 My dad said I was lucky he didn't send me back planetside. I told him he couldn't, because no ships were coming from New Hope for another five weeks. He told me that I was wrong, mister, and that I was a kid and I didn't know everything, so I should listen to him, because there was a whole shipful of post-docs coming from New Hope that very day, and he was sure the captain would be willing to take me back. I said fine, I'll go spend the rest of the summer with Mom and Lance Jr. At least Lance Jr. wasn't stupid enough to just stand there while I shot him with a nailgun.

And then my dad got quiet. It was weird. He just sat there and looked at me. It was so weird that when he finally said, "Go to your room." I just did, without even yelling or throwing stuff or anything. A little while later I heard him leave, and I didn't hear him come back that night.

He told me the next night at dinner that he'd been busy all day with the new post-docs. He said he wasn't mad any more, and that he'd had my asiBro checked out, and that it was fine, no harm done. So, if I wanted, I could have him back. But only if I promised not to shoot him any more.

7 Besides getting my asiBro back, my dad took me to meet all the new post-docs to show me he wasn't mad. They were all eating together in the mess when I came in. When I saw they were human, I was really relieved: I thought a 'post-

doc' was some kind of new alien creature they had discovered. One new alien creature on a space station is enough.

The post-docs were knife. A lot younger than my dad and Grisget and Malloy and all the other scientists on the space station. And funny. They were always *fragbagging* around. My dad said they have *skrat* for brains. I said they do not, they just like to have fun. He said you don't go on a scientific space station to have fun. I said you can say that again and he said what? and I said never mind.

I hung out with them a lot. I knew the space station, so I showed them around, and they said I could be their mascot. They gave me a PhD in Space Station Knowledge and Etiquette and called me Doctor Randy and took me with them everywhere, even into the Macrobe Lab without my dad.

Their first real day in the lab was a week after they came, and I went with them. Dr Grisget was conducting an orientation for them in the lab. He kept congratulating them and telling them what a great honor it was to have been selected for this post-doc. Maria Centas, who was the same height as me and was always laughing about something, said to me, "This guy is really full of himself, isn't he?" And I nodded yes, but I didn't say anything because I didn't want Dr Grisget to notice me and tell me I wasn't allowed to be there.

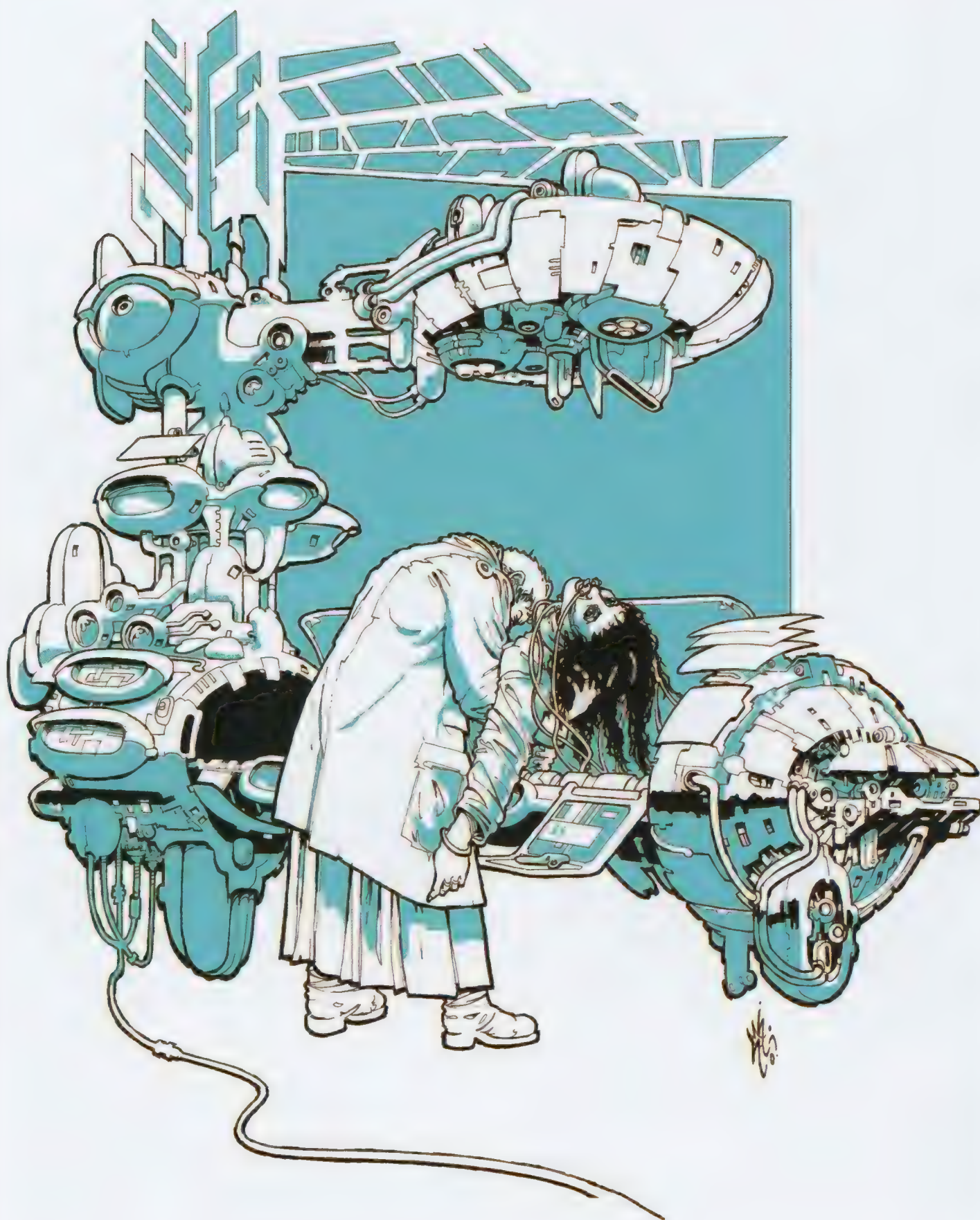
But then he did something really knife; he opened one of the incubators. All the post-docs huddled around it, so I couldn't really see. He said, "Ladies and gentleman, this is the reason you are here. The Macrobe Conservation Project is dedicated to saving macrobes from extinction, thereby helping us to preserve the ecosystem we discovered when we first landed on New Hope." And then he said the whole history of the whole project, how when settlers first came to New Hope they cut down a lot of trees, only they didn't know the difference between the different kinds of trees, and they didn't know that they were cutting down brain trees because they didn't have that name back then. They didn't know that brain trees were basically trees with brains, and that they had a symbiotic relationship with macrobes, and with the trees getting cut down the macrobes started dying off. Plus a few people had been infected by macrobes, and the macrobes started taking over their brains, and that scared a lot of people, so they started killing macrobes like crazy. And since a macrobe is basically just a big squishy gray-and-green blob of toilet-water, it was really easy to kill them. Dr Grisget said, "Now they are almost extinct. We are all that's left to protect them from total annihilation."

I finally squirmed through the post-docs so I could see inside the incubator. I'd seen glimpses inside them before. Mostly they shaved the cadavers' heads and had them in those green papers outfits they give you in hospitals that don't close in the back. But this one was a woman, and you could tell because she had long curly woman's hair, and an earring in the ear I could see, and she had a dress on with flowers. Earth flowers.

I wasn't tall enough to see her face, but I knew the dress was my mom's. She had the same hair as my mom too. I couldn't figure out why my dad would take one of my mom's dresses and put it on a dead lady. My mom would be so mad if she found out.

8 I wasn't supposed to call New Hope by myself, because calls from the space station were very expensive. But I didn't like that my dad had put one of my mom's dresses on one of the cadavers.

Lance Jr.'s big *kikface* appeared on the monitor. "You're in trouble,



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Randy," he said. "You're not supposed to call."

"You're in trouble too," I said back. "You're not supposed to answer."

"There's no one else around to answer. Aunt Lois went out for groceries."

"Where's Mom?"

Lance Jr. gave me a really freaky look. "She's with you, stupid."

"No she's not, *fragbag*. She's with you."

"Since when? Is she coming home?"

"She's always been home. Stop kidding around."

"Look, sharkface, I'm not kidding. She went with you." And then he kind of squinted and said, "You haven't seen Mom?"

And then I saw my mom walk right behind him on the monitor. I pointed behind him and shouted, "See, *skrat*breath, she's right there! Liar! She's right there!"

Lance Jr. turned around, then turned back to the phone. "Man, are you dumb. That's just an asiMom." He turned around again and said, "Come here" to my mom and my mom walked over in the exact same way an asiMom walks. Then Lance Jr. said, "Increase praise." And my mom put a hand on his head and said, "Sorry, but praise level is already set to maximum." Lance Jr. kind of shrugged at me and said, "I learn best from positive reinforcement."

9 That night during dinner, dad got a call from Dr Malloy. "We're having a little bit of a problem here," he said, "but it's nothing we can't handle, Lance." My dad said, "I'll be right over," and then, when the speaker was off, he said, "This place would fall apart without me." And then he headed out of the door.

My asiMom cleared the dishes, and my asiBro asked me if I wanted to play a game. I told him to go *skrat* himself. He said, "I don't know what '*skrat*' means. Would you like to add the word to my dictionary?" So I told him to go recharge himself instead. And then I watched the clock for exactly five minutes. Then I got up and followed my dad.

You need an ID to swipe to get into the Macrobe Lab, so I stopped at Maria Centas's room and took hers. She was having dinner with everyone in the mess, and she never locked her door. And I didn't think she would be mad. She would probably just laugh.

I swiped her card and went in the lab. I crawled on the floor and peeked around incubators to find my dad. The floor was cold and really clean.

Dad was shaking hands with Dr Malloy. "I know I say this every night," my dad said, "but thanks."

Dr Malloy just gave him a few pats on the back and said, "You take care of yourself, okay? For your sake, and your sons." And then he started walking toward me, so I had to duck behind a different incubator and hide there until he left the lab.

Once Dr Malloy was gone, I peeked around the incubator to watch my dad again. He had opened one of the incubators, the one with the cadaver that had on my mom's dress. He just looked at that dead lady for a long time. Then he put his arm under her and kind of propped her up until she almost looked like she was sitting. He moved the hair out of the dead lady's face and he said, "Hi Cathy." My mom's name is Catherine.

And then he took out the biggest syringe with the longest needle I've ever seen in my life and stuck it in the dead lady's ear, all the way. I almost screamed. It took a long time to push all of the medicine into the dead lady's brain. When he was done, he

put the syringe on the tray and then held the dead lady with both arms, just looking at her and waiting for something to happen.

The dead lady's head sat up like only her neck had come back to life. Then she opened her eyes, then closed them, then practiced opening and closing them. She opened and closed her mouth next, in exactly the same way. She stuck out her tongue then sucked it back into her face and moved her eyebrows every crazy way they would go.

My dad took out his pocket recorder. He turned it on and said, "6:44PM, stimulant administered. Macrobe 'Catherine' exhibiting advanced facial movement ability. Cadaver has recovered doll-eye movement, but lacks a blink reflex and is not yet breathing. Macrobe 'Catherine' seems on-schedule to fully permeate the medulla in three to five weeks." Then he turned the recorder off and put it back in his pocket.

And then he hugged the dead lady again. And he kind of rocked her back and forth and he said, "Cathy. Oh Cathy. Why did you leave me Cathy?" And all the while, the dead lady never stopped making all those crazy faces.

10 I snuck out of the Lab and went back to the apartment. I told the asiMom and the asiBro to follow me. The stupid asiBro said, "I am not fully recharged yet. Do you want me to stop recharging now?" And I said, "Yes, *fragbag*!" And so he stopped recharging and followed me.

The three of us went to Engineering. Now the door was locked because of the nailgun thing, but I used Maria Centas's ID and the door opened. "Follow me," I said, and they followed.

We walked to the space station's trash compactor. It was huge; it looked like it could crush a planet. I walked them over to it and said, "Get in."

They climbed in. I couldn't believe how stupid they were. What did they think was going to happen? I told them to kneel, and they did, both of them looking up at me like I was the dad. Then I said, "Pray," and they both bowed their heads and folded their hands, and the asiMom asked, "What prayer would you like us to say?" And I said, "Just pray quietly," so they just pretended to pray quietly. Then the asiBro said, "This is a fun game!" and the asiMom said, "Honey, you have to be quiet. We're praying now."

I walked over to the compactor's command console – that's exactly what it said on the front of it, COMMAND CONSOLE, like you could control the whole world with it – and hit the big red button. I'd always wanted to.

The compactor came to life and this big slab of steel started to slowly push down on the heads of the asiBots. It kept pushing until I couldn't see their heads any more. "Keep praying!" I yelled. Then I heard metal getting smashed and glass breaking and small electric pops and plastic splintering. And then the compactor hit bottom. It stopped there for a moment, and then started to slowly come back up.

I turned to face the door. I'm sure both asiBots had called my dad to tell them they were being destroyed. I was sure he would come running, just like last time. And when he got there I would ask him if that dead lady was really my mom.

Carlos finds himself writing a lot about robot companionship these days. By day, he directs the First Year Experience program and teaches in the English department at Pace University in New York City. You can find his recently-released novella 'The Last Generation to Die' in *The Amityville House of Pancakes*, vol.2 from Creative Guy Publishing.

I look at my five daughters as I leave the apartment and see only my fear of losing them.

In the hall, I shake the roaches from my shoes and head past the elevator for the stairwell. I tell my wife and children never to ride in that rickety lift, but I suspect they do anyway while I'm at work or asleep.

Outside, the gray snow falls like white noise.

I wonder if today will be the day.

the unsolvable deathtrap

jack mangan

My cab's first passenger is a man older than me, accompanied by a girl younger than my eldest daughter. When he's not groping her, he's hitting her. It's all I can do to keep from driving through a guardrail and killing us all.

The next fare is even more offensive. He only says two words, "Bloomberg Street," but his stench speaks to me,



taunts me, jeers at me the entire twenty-minute drive through the crosstown tubes. We witness four accidents and steer around the wreckage of four others during our short trip. As I dodge each obstruction of bloody fiberglass, rubber, Plexiglas and steel, I wonder when it will be my turn to inhabit one of these impromptu mid-lane, crumpled structures. Once the stinking man hands me his wad of gritty, smelly paper bills and gets out, it takes ten minutes with the windows open to replace the smell of his filth with the pleasant, familiar fumes of exhaust and sewage.

My third and final fare of the evening is a late-twenties, ethnically ambiguous male, smelling faintly of cologne and danger. I'd caught a glimpse of his hailing light at a port near the 9:00 tube lane. I was at ground level, but had enough room to maneuver leftward through lanes to get under the shield to his access ramp. There were a number of people there, clamoring for my back seat, but I indicated with a nod that I was taking him, whose signal I'd answered. In spite of this, some of the usual violence had followed. My intended fare had shrugged off his would-be interceptors easily and slammed the door shut three times until all of their limbs were clear of the opening.

"Welcome! Please buckle up; this vehicle is not equipped with gyroscopic harness seats to keep you upright in the upper lanes." The automated message recites the rest of the disclaimers as I pull out again into the fast-moving traffic.

He needs me to take him to pick up a friend in the suburbs and then bring them both back to the city. He speaks with a grin that encourages me to be cheered by the prospect of such an expensive ride. I offer no words or facial expression in reply, wondering why he seems so subconsciously aware of his sport coat's inside pocket, wondering for the millionth time if the souvenir mini baseball bat beneath my seat will be weapon enough, should I need to wield it.

Midtown 33rd Street has seen a bus skid out to form a barrier across the lowest four lanes in the tube. It had apparently swerved and lost control trying to avoid a stalled truck upside-down in the 11:00 lane. I sit looking at the mess up ahead, waiting patiently for a path to open and let me through.

"Too much cholesterol in this artery, man," says my fare. His accent is indistinguishable. "Turn around and find another way. I can't keep my friend waiting."

I'm between the 3:00 and 2:00 lanes in the tubestreet, but with no room to reverse or go forward. There are some gaps in the slowly-unclogging lane to my left, though I haven't even room enough to sidle over there. My passenger slides across his seat to the right, holding some kind of small black device in his hand. He opens the door and does something illegal; I feel the unsettling shift of weight as he releases all of the tires' grips on the pavement. He closes the door and grins madly.

"Hey!" I yell, far too late. He's unstuck the tires too quickly; suddenly, we're going sideways, sliding fast to the left down the sloped tube, narrowly avoiding the Firestang racing up the 4:00 lane. The cab's front left quarterpanel glances hard into a Mercedai's rear bumper and slides ass-corner first into a bakery truck in lane 5:00. The Mercedai revs forward just enough to release my car's front end. Suddenly unsupported, gravity slides the front end down leftways to complete our slam into the delivery

truck. Angry shouts coming in from all directions, I maneuver out, screech across the bottom bowl of the tube, and skid to a stop in a discharge/entry ramp.

I turn and stare at my fare through the gap in the scuffed Plexiglas, feeling the onset of some righteous anger. "Out of this cab!"

Then, for the thirty-eighth time in my career as a cabbie, I see the inside cylinder of a gun barrel. This is the first time it ever strikes me, though, as a miniature version of the tubestreets I drive through every night.

"I hate to sour our friendship like this, but keep driving. It's very important that my friend and I complete our mission today."

I sigh defeat and turn back around, feeling the circle spotlight of the gun barrel's aim on the back of my head.

There is a loud thunder of crunching and tearing from above; my passenger and I look up to watch a cluster of just-crashed, inertia-compelled vehicles rolling and skidding over our shielded port. When the noise has mostly stopped, I pull back out onto the roadway and maneuver around the mess, smoking here, leaking there, tiny scattered shards of vehicles everywhere, crunching beneath my tires.

"Don't worry; you'll still get paid in full for the fare."

But I do worry. Not about the money, but about every other danger my imagination can manufacture. I have a superstitious belief – scratch that – a superstitious *certainty* that the best prevention method against tragedy is to worry and agonize over all potential catastrophes. Never relax and let yourself be at ease; never give in to optimism. Never omit any of the possible calamitous outcomes in your worrying, otherwise the fate you overlooked will be the manner of your doom. And always be aware that even strict adherence to this system is not a guarantee against ill fortune.

"You don't drive on the upper lanes much, do you pal?"

"You deactivated my tires' grip. Remember? We have to stick to the bottom," I say. The gun has returned to whatever fold it had originally come from. I sense his Cheshire grin in the rearview mirror, even as I try not to see him.

"The effects of that only last for about thirty or so seconds. Your anti-grav traction will work fine again if you go back up to the top lanes." He pauses, but I can tell he has more to say. "But even before I slid us out of that traffic jam, you still were driving really cautiously, especially for a cabbie; sticking to the bottom half of the tubes, like you didn't really want to go upside down. Am I right? What are you, afraid?"

I shrug, extremely tired of this. "I've heard of devices like the one you have. There are a lot of crazies out there who might get one and use it just for fun."

"Ah, so you liked my toy then? It's the least interesting one I own. My friend will have something much more exciting." I do look this time; he's smiling smugly and staring out of the window. "So what are you then, some kinda pantophobic? Look at all those cars up there right now in the ceiling lanes. None of them are falling! In fact, you never really hear about vehicles losing grip and falling – yet you still don't trust that your cab's wheels will hold you up there? You're afraid that you'll be the one unlucky guy in ten million who dies because of a bizarre traction malfunction? Amazing! You never travel by airplane, do you pal? I bet you haven't been on a roller-coaster in decades, if ever."

I shake my head in disgust, but realize too late that I'm also giving the answer he's looking for.

"You been driving a cab too long, seen too many crazy accidents happen out of nowhere; it's got you afraid of the whole

world. You gotta forget all that shit, pal; life isn't like these fuckin' tubestreets." He laughs a quick, strange little laugh. "I guess I'm not the guy who should be telling you that, though."

I shoot my best Clint Eastwood look into the mirror, but it's wasted; he's staring out the window and doesn't even notice. I sigh and refocus on the road. At least we've finally gotten out of the deep city; I'm now driving into the madman's nightmare of loops leading to the trans-channel bridge. We're only a really long way from the suburbs now, as opposed to the extremely long distance that we were before.

I think he must be the least desperate person ever to point a gun at me, and possibly the most frightening. I wonder about his scheme, and whether I'm helping to bring some terrible dream to fruition.

Just an anonymous granule of cork in an unsolvable bottleneck. The problem is that the on-ramps and the Dinkins Bridge's twelve levels are all 2-D flat. On the decks where there's no construction, the cars sit parked or moving slowly to get past the accidents. Sitting in the jam on the second-lowest level, I wonder if the structure is going to choose that moment to collapse from the strain of all those tons of vehicles. Even as huge as it is, the massive thing swings sickeningly in the wind. I look at the underside of the level above and wonder if it will give way and drop a big rig onto the roof of my taxi. I wonder if someone will try to cheat through the traffic jam and their inevitable crash will carom into my cab and send us through the guardrail, into the waters below. In all the doomy scenarios I dream up, I take comfort in the probability that my passenger will die too.

"God, this traffic is killing me! Hey pal, don't you ever listen to any music?"

After I'd had three memory sticks of song files stolen, I'd stopped bringing music to the car. I never tune to the broadcast stations, driving in silence as a kind of silent, personal protest against the city's rampant kleptomania. Besides, the quiet allows me to hear my own thoughts.

"Here. Pop this in. It's a mix of Billy Joel tracks."

God I hate Billy Joel. But, I remember the yawning O of the gun barrel and plug in his memory stick. I notice that it's a high-capacity stick, its drive almost completely filled. That's – oh, I can't do the math down to the minute – a couple of hours of Billy Joel. I search the level above's underside again for structural cracks.

Well, at least the music shuts him up for the rest of the trip. The icy roads create a chilling, slushy fear at the core of my being. I feel a dread certainty of every other car on the road that they're going to hit a patch of black ice and lose control right into me.

We pull up to the target address, a tired, white, aluminum-sided house in a quiet suburban neighborhood, just as 'Captain Jack' is segueing into 'We Didn't Start the Fire'.

The other guy hurries out of the front door, slips on the icy sidewalk, and gets into the car, shivering wordlessly next to his friend. I see my original fare looking at me in the rearview.

"All right, pal. All that's left is for you to bring us back into the city. I'll tell you the address once we get downtown." The two of them then begin to converse in some language full of Ks and Zs and SHs. There's no family resemblance at all, but – the new guy looks and talks just like the other one.

My inner jury is becoming more and more swayed by my suspicion's prosecutors. These two are up to something bad, some evil deed of a yet-to-be-determined scale. And I'm driving them

to their ground zero. An accessory. I look at the battered Polaroids of my daughters, wedged into the door handle's cracks, and see only my fear of being lost to them.

Back on the Dinkins Bridge, headed into the deep city; again an anonymous mote of phlegm in the eternal congestion. The new guy pulls an encapsulated vial of some amber fluid from one pocket, a small pod terminal from another, and fits a few wires between slots on the beaker and ports on the little microtop computer.

He types something quickly and then triumphantly strikes the RETURN key. LEDs on the vial start to go nuts, much to the delight of the two men.

"Genius," smiles the first. Both of them then look up at me, both wearing matching unsettling expressions. I have no hope of getting out of this alive.

"Ah, good song! Whenever my girl gives me problems, I just pop this track into the player. Hey, pal, that's a wedding ring, right? You must know what I'm talkin' about. Doesn't this song say it perfectly?"

'Always A Woman'.

I shrug.

"Billy speaks the truth, man." I see him sit back and look at his friend. He then sits forward again eagerly. "Hey, you two haven't been properly introduced. I'd like you to meet my friend, A.J. A.J., I'd like you to meet our driver... oh hell, I'm not even gonna try to pronounce that name. He's a bit of a chicken for a cabbie; drives slow, mostly sticks to the lower lanes. But he seems like a nice enough guy."

"That's OK. I'd rather not take any chances, not today," says A.J. "A slow, cautious driver is preferable to a reckless speeder. Nice to meet you, buddy."

I nod, but say nothing.

Ah, the exultation of breaking loose from logjammed traffic and into open highway. The other vehicles around me accelerate dazedly, as if their drivers can't yet comprehend their newfound freedom. The long winding offramp here is still only a 2-D stretch of flat lanes, but the city's circular tubestreet entrances lie just ahead, piled on top of each other, with the networks of delicate ramps rising and snaking on their pylons to feed into the cylindrical openings.

We depart the bridge and look right into the teeth of the city.

There it is, dead ahead, the city's ambitious project of the past decade to cut into its massive traffic problem, multiplying its major avenues' lane capacities by rolling the streets up into long winding, tubular pipes, then stacking those tubes on top of each other. Basically, turning the streets into a sewer system for all of the waste to pass efficiently through.

The stacks of tubes stop at three levels, though special interests are pushing for construction of a fourth story of tubestreets on top. People say the cylinder openings all piled together there resemble honeycombs, which has earned the city the nickname of 'the hive'. I feel almost tempted to vocalize my private opinion that it looks nothing like a goddamn honeycomb, to ask my two passengers if they agree with me.

I hit the ramp to the Ed Koch tube and keep my mouth shut.

The two in the back are engrossed in some foreign-language conversation anyway. I watch their heated discussion, their hands gesturing repeatedly to the vial and the microtop. What the hell are these two plotting?

The clusterfuck at the tube entrance is not too bad. 'Piano Man' comes on and the smile runs away from my face. Man, what am I doing here?

The two of them continue to chatter as I accelerate to meet the

speed limit in the tube's lowest 6:00 lane. My mind twists their language's words into taunts for my cautious driving, my lack of faith, my insecurity within technology's cradle. Angered by their jeers, I put my left blinker on and accelerate aggressively through the lanes. 7:00, 8:00, around a pile-up in 9, a stalled Caddy in 10, 11:00; I exhale again as I settle into the top-center high-noon lane, hyper-aware of the pull of gravity on my cab and its wheels, of our total dependence on the traction technology in the car's tires. We're speeding upside-down in the tube now, like spiders across the ceiling.

"Yeah buddy! That's more like it!"

I feel my stomach wanting to drop; I look up toward the ground level, watch a big rig and trailer conducting a serpentine lane-shift along the bottom. Since leaving the Dinkins, the two in back have been conversing less. Their nervous, frenetic tension radiates stronger with each passing block. I wonder if they're planning to unleash their unspecified nightmare right from the backseat of my cab. I wonder if it will be some grandiose, violent cataclysm, or something more subtle and deadly on a wide scale, like the release of a terrible disease.

I wonder if a previously undetected asteroid will smash into the earth, causing an apocalypse to one-up the one that killed the dinosaurs.

A motorcycle, a station wagon, two Chevrobishi pickup trucks, a retrofitted 1998 Porsche Boxter, an empty school bus, a mail truck, and a Volkswagon Beetle (the old kind) all collide directly up ahead in lane 12:00, each vehicle spinning off into debris-spitting hunks of...stuff. At least ten secondary accidents immediately follow, but I dodge through all of the dangerous debris and keep going.

The two in back look up with mild curiosity, but quickly return their attention to the microtop's little screen. A.J. is typing away while the other guy points and makes comments. They argue a bit in their language; I interpret it as ironing out the details of the execution of their dread plan. The first one had mocked me for my anxious mistrust of each moment, my frightened view of the world, but he and his friend have engendered an entirely new sensation of fear in me, a terror so tangible I feel I could scoop it up and hold it in my hands.

The undulating orange glow from around the tube bend ahead is either hell itself come to earth inside this tubestreet, or the fireglow from a nasty accident. I count either possibility as equally likely, but it turns out to be the latter. As the street curves, I begin to see bonfires of wrecks at different hands on the clock ahead; one in the 8:00 lane, one in the 3:00, another at 7:00. They're bad enough the models of the cars that kindle them are indistinguishable.

The natural rubberneck slowdowns are starting to accumulate; I look back at my two fares, their full attentions upon the vial and the computer terminal and their doomsday scenario. We fully round the bend and I see the big problem ahead. A burning tanker truck has jackknifed across the bottom lanes, with a little Japanese car buried in the crook of its L-shape. Police vehicles and big strong-robotic-crane-armed vehicles are there, the former serving to evac the area, the latter to safely withdraw the little car from the truck, while simultaneously straightening it out again and freeing up the lower lanes.

A.J. mutters something and they both laugh. Billy Joel is going on about a matter of trust.

Something snaps inside of me.

As the cars in the uppers around me decelerate, I accelerate faster, slipping deftly from lane 11:00 back across to lane 1:00, dodging in and out of the gawkers and motorists caught in the traffic trap. My foot trembles on the gas pedal, but I keep it pressed, feeling the fear coursing through my system like a paralytic drug. No force known to man could pry my shaking hands from their 10 and 2 grip on the wheel.

"Whoa, pal; what's gotten into you? You suddenly in a hurry?"

I say nothing, zipping past a long rented limo, clipping the front bumper as I cut in front of it. Riding high-noon, baby.

The first passenger leans forward through the Plexiglas. "Look pal -"

I choose that moment to jam the brakes. We skid forward, fishtailing but pinballing off cars on either side and staying in the lane. I'd chosen a decent stretch of open pavement to hit the brakes, but it's obvious that we're still going to hit the rear end of the slow-moving florist's van up ahead. Just before impact, I reach back and grab my passenger's lapels, doing my damndest to pull him forward through the big gap in the Plexiglas shield.

We strike pretty hard into the delivery van's ass bumper, and I half-achieve my goal. My shoulder hits the steering wheel hard; my first passenger lurches forward to wedge halfway between front and back.

He shoots a look of gritted teeth at me, then launches a barrage of what sounds like curses in his native tongue, struggling with his free right arm to liberate his pinched left. I take the opportunity to bring my souvenir bat hard against his jaw, then begin to search through his jacket pockets, pulling out all manner of strange devices. Finally, I find the one that had de-tractioned my tires back on 33rd Street. A.J. pounds on the Plexiglas and shouts angrily, but that's the extent of his ability to affect anything.

1-2-3-4 Pressure!

I'm so fully engaged in fending off the guy's free hand, I have no idea what's going on outside of the taxi. I imagine a speeding car roaring up from behind, its inattentive driver spotting our mid-lane obstacle too late; the impact of the crash launching us all into fatal injuries.

The pistol! Still digging into his pocket, my hand closes on it; I immediately feel his cold fingers grip on top of mine. He screams out some kind of war cry, which succeeds in rattling me. I drop the gun to the ceiling, and he grabs for it. The pistol has fallen just beyond his easy grasp, but his fingertips touch the handle grip and work carefully to nudge it closer. Oh no goddamn way. I bat it away, consider picking it up myself, instead gun the car into reverse, smacking hard into the grill of the minivan that's stopped behind our crash. The move creates just enough room for me to dart out and around the crumple-reared florist truck and again into accelerating motion.

"What are you doing?" the guy shouts, swinging his free right arm at me, but not able to generate momentum enough to hit hard. So he does the next logical thing; God, his gouging fingers hurt on my face. The little bat breaks across his chin; I then palm his face and smear him back, using my free left hand to swing open my door.

There's no way in hell I'm going to hang out of the door, upside down in the tube at this speed and height.

The guy grabs my hair and pulls hard. I scream out and smash my forehead hard into his, releasing his grip long enough for me to shake my head free. We bump past a panicking woman's Toyoldsmobile and it slams my door back shut. I open it again and

Billy Joel is going on

swing out, momentarily mesmerized by the speeding pavement; it blurs quickly past, mere inches above my face.

I can only guess at how to use this little black device. It has a sticky, gluey underside and one button on top; the button clicks under my thumb and a red LED lights up. I adhere the sticky part to the taxi's undercarriage; once it seems satisfied with its contact on the car, the red light dims out and another LED glows green.

I watch in a surreal, reality-detached moment as the ceiling-ground lets go of the car and begins to recede into the sky. The tires have lost traction on the 12:00 lane and are now rotating free of all contact. My stomach lurches into freefall. God, are we starting to spin? Are we twisting through the air, falling directly toward the stalled tanker truck below? People down there are pointing up and panicking; the two guys in the backseat are screaming mortal terror in the most hilarious way. I begin to cackle wildly.

We fall whoa-oh-oh-oh, for the longest time.

There's a deafening noise, a horrible jarring feeling of bouncing, tumbling, rolling. I feel the man wedged between front and back seats being jostled in most unnatural ways, his upper half smacking hard into me; I feel warm fluids splashing onto me, and know that I'm going to be sick. There's a greater roaring warmth coming from somewhere outside, cooking the car, which is still rolling for an even roasting on all sides.

The fiberglass-metal-synthetic shell of the cab crumples with each concrete impact; we finally stop bouncing and skid forward, sparks flying into the car through where the windshield is supposed to be.

I'm not dead. I'm on the ground level now, but still hanging upside-down. I can't move at all, trapped by pain, by incapacitated extremities, between the seat and the dashboard. Where's the steering wheel? Isn't a car supposed to have a steering wheel? I look over at my passenger. He never got free of that perch between seats. The human skull is not supposed to be shaped like that.

I look at the Plexiglas barrier toward the backseat. At some point, A.J. had taken off his seat-belt; now he's given the rear interior a red paint job. I meet his fading eyes through the stained Plexiglas. His last weak words are, "How did you know...?"

"When you're paranoid about everyone, you're bound to be right sometimes," I respond, for his dead ears.

I'd shake my head if I could; I close my eyes and feel the world swim. So this is that horrible trauma I'd spent my every waking moment dreading. I wish I could call my wife, to tell her, and to tell my daughters one last time how much I love them. I can't remember the last time I used that word. Love. God, there are moments of such intense pain.

I was wrong. I am dead.

Footsteps.

The hollow metal sound of my passenger door torn open.

"Hey, this cabbie looks like he's alive! God, there ain't a thing unbroken in this car except for the radio."

I wish those were words coming out of my mouth, instead of bloody teeth and incomprehensible moans.

"He's trying to talk! What is it, buddy?"

More moans.

"What? The music stick...? What about it?"

"Turn it off!" I manage. "God, turn it off please. Don't let me die with 'Uptown Girl' on the radio. Don't let that song be the last thing I hear in this world. Please, I beg you."

"Sure, sure pal. But don't start saying your goodbyes yet. You

gonna be fine, we just need to get an ambulance. You pretty banged up, but you ain't gonna die. Can't say the same for your passengers though; looks like we already too late for them."

It turns out that the rescuer was right. EMTs freed me, doctors confirmed his diagnosis. Bruises and broken bones just about everywhere, a few cracked teeth, but I'd somehow survived the tubestreet crash, while my two passengers had died of the injuries sustained.

Inexplicably, life had given me a break.

Police had searched through the crash site and found the evidence of my passengers' dire plan, though no details were released. I'd subsequently had to endure many exhausting rounds of interrogations and commendations. My face and name were in the newspapers for their full fifteen minutes, for all of my dead passengers' comrades to see and memorize. The cameras turned on my wife and daughters next, to make their identities also well-known for all of my new enemies. The press turned against me when I attempted to defend my family from their exposing lenses and stories, painting me as a madman who'd killed some bad guys accidentally during a homicidal fit.

I lie here now in my hospital bed, a caricature, mummified in my full body cast, my left leg suspended inside of its plaster and gauze shell. There is a shapeless brownish stain dried into the new sheet they just put on my bed; I can almost see the harmful microbes there, like tiny swimmers in a brown pool. In fact, I see evil bacteria moving on every surface in this unclean place; swarms of the vile little things even fill the air in the halls and the room. My requests for sanitary conditions and security guards have gone largely ignored. As you've no doubt guessed, a mutual dislike and distrust has grown between me and the hospital staff.

I listen to my roommate coughing incessantly behind his curtain, wonder what flavor of plague he is carelessly unleashing upon the population, starting with me.

No matter the hour, this wing of the hospital is a noisy place. Yet I'm certain that every sound is the comrades of my two dead passengers, coming to exact their revenge. I'm the easiest target imaginable; immobilized and imprisoned in my cast in this bed, with no real security watch.

I lie here and wonder when they will come, until exhaustion and boredom finally claim my consciousness.

Awake again.

My daughters are here with me now. They look beautiful by the sunny window and I tell them so. Seeing their pretty faces, I want to tell them that life is a journey of joys and wonders in a world of glorious possibilities, but I don't believe a word of that. The terrible truth is that the world is an unsolvable deathtrap, full of willful predators and malicious fatal coincidences. Life within it is a series of losses, tragic accidents, and near misses, until you finally break down and become the next anonymous tragedy in the infinite march.

I want them to leave, so that they're not here when the men come for me.

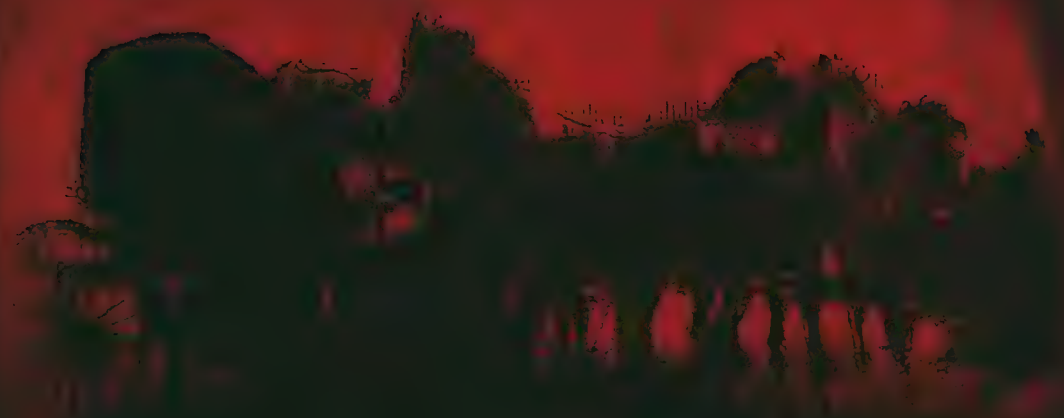
I smile and keep all of these thoughts to myself.

I wonder if today will be the day.

Jack is a writer, musician, podcaster, software engineer etc, born in New Jersey but now residing in Arizona with his wife and three children. His short novel *Spherical Tomi* is available at www.fictionwise.com and www.poddiobooks.com.

INTERMISSION

STORIES • AFTER THE PARTY BY RICHARD CALDER • ILLUSTRATED BY DAVID SENECA



AFTER THE PARTY

a nymphomaniac by richard calder



part two: hot pink

'As other men wake to puberty and dream of possessing a woman, he had been driven by the idea of killing one...At such moments he was no longer his own master but rather the obedient servant of his muscles, of the rabid beast within...of a relapse into primitive savagery that was dragging him back into the forest, among the wolves, among the wolves that ate women...Did it all go back so far, to the evil which women had perpetrated upon his sex, to the sense of grievance accumulated from male to male ever since that first betrayal in the depths of some cave? And he could feel, too, in the midst of his attacks the need to do battle with the female, to conquer her, subjugate her, the perverted need to sling her dead body over his shoulder, like a prey snatched away from others, ever his.'

Émile Zola, *La Bête Humaine* (1890)

"W-what **happened back** there?" moaned Cat, coming around.

She sat next to him in the brougham, her nostrils flared as if in connoisseurship of the expensive leather that – like chocolate, poisonous flowers, French perfume and *bijouterie* – he knew all catgirls reserved a special affection for. Nicodemus gazed at her, his face struggling to resolve the wonder and contempt that dolly-mops always inspired in him, before wonder and something that he had not felt before – something that surprised and even frightened him a little – won the day.

"You experienced a *petit mort*," he said. "Several, in fact."

"Bloody hell," she murmured.

Now that he had the time and inclination to treat her to a more leisurely appraisal, he discovered that her beauty was utterly enchanting. To be sure, it was a beauty that betrayed no hidden dimension; it was, perhaps, strictly speaking, not beauty at all, but rather a realization of a sheer, and quite devastating, prettiness. "Imago" (he would often remark to his fellow black knights in one of his disquisitions on the nature of *pornae*) "is both a last or perfect stage in an insect's development and the optical counterpart or image of a thing." And for him, she represented the last, perfect stage of femininity: its evolution into a quintessence of image, in other words, into the death-in-life, life-in-death of a photograph.

She was a *puella* with a *retroussé* nose, a slight, but tremblingly invariable pout of the lips, and eyes stained with the juice of crushed periwinkles and forget-me-nots. She was an innocent and a whore. But she was, above all else, a doll *manqué*, a mannequin-in-waiting.

"You were lucky," he said. "Female hyper-orgasmic epilepsy can kill."

She rubbed her temples. "I can believe it." She closed her eyes and her head lolled back onto the carriage seat. "I feel right corned, I do," she added. "Like I've been on the ran-tan a whole week."

"Shush, my little tuppenny-bit," he said, smiling wryly. Laying his hand on her brow he examined her as he might a less pretty, more human, woman. But as his hand became transfused with her body heat, he withdrew, unable to concede to a passion that would betray him or an empathy that would unman him, and instead continued with the purely visual examination that he had begun in the house. It would, he told himself as he reflected upon the futility of his life's work, reveal as much about her as any diagnosis offered up by conventional medicine.

False eyelashes – mascara-honed into ranks of slick, elliptical spikes – accentuated her vacuousness. And the pencilled eyebrows – two outrageous circumflexes that suggested she lived in a state of unremitting astonishment – consolidated the effect, so that her whole face was imbued with a paralysis of sublime inanity.

She was a little girl with her nose pressed to the sweetshop window; a doe that the huntsman had lined up in his sights. She was Hoffmann's Olympia, a beautiful, unblinking automaton. She was an animated corpse. As such, she challenged his own world and its too often painful, psychological depths, and offered a seductive alternative: to renege on the revolutionary struggle and embrace the enemy that was Babylon. For only Babylonians – those girls who had attained the acme of femininity and become representations of themselves – could provide a bulwark against the failings of that other woman, life.

Consumed by the sight of her, he found himself staring back through an avenue in time that had suddenly crystallized before him and rediscovering the moment – but one of many, perhaps – when a boy had learned the meaning of the word 'obsession'

and dreamt strange, bloody dreams.

When he was about eleven he had discovered that girls, and indeed femininity itself, were *uncanny*.

Waxwork figures, and most especially dolls, possess a quality of eeriness that emanates not from foreign shores, but from that which is closest to us. This 'uncanniness' suggests that familiar objects – such as beloved toys and playthings – may be animate, while the animate beings with which we are most familiar – friends, family, the little girl who lives next door – are in fact dead.

Of all the living dolls he had met, played with, kissed, enjoyed and left broken, the uncanniest was surely the catgirl who sat beside him, and not because she was so different, but because – as she herself had suggested – she was so typical, so generic, so paradoxically commonplace.

Concluding his examination, he drew back from her, alarmed at the thrill of terror she inspired.

"Please," she said, "I don't understand. What am I *doing* here?"

"You fell to the floor and began convulsing," he replied, matter-of-factly, as if he were at the bedside of a sick child he had no wish to unduly alarm. "I had thought to convey you to my surgery before the seizure induced internal haemorrhaging or dislocation of the spine."

She massaged her neck, winced, and then adjusted her bonnet and smoothed out the creases in her dress, putting herself in order as best she could. "Bloody hell," she said once again, but this time more assertively, seemingly at pains to have him realize that, though she had left parties with many a stranger, it was not her custom to leave on quite such an outlandish note.

"You seem...to have recovered," he said, but suspected that he spoke less than the truth. The girl who sat next to him wasn't the girl he had met at the *soirée*. She was different. A switch had been tripped, sending a jolt through her that had modified her personality, just as if she had been subjected to the galvanic belt, faradization, or some other form of electroshock treatment.

"Recovered? I wouldn't be so sure about that," she said, turning her head and staring up at him through her long, flirtatious eyelashes. "You've turned me into a right mess." Her voice became a whisper. "A *right* mess."

It interested him, this sudden change in her. And in his professional capacity he began to ponder how it had come about. Was it a by-product of the hysteria that had reshaped her flesh, as Dr Freud had suggested? If so, *pornae* might be diagnosed by means of the new science of psychoanalysis rather than by the clumsier methodologies of gynopometry, and at an earlier age, too, he thought, thus facilitating extermination.

"You're really very handsome, you know," she continued, her lips compressing to accentuate their natural pout and her eyes rolling in imitation of a music-hall artiste performing a *risqué* burlesque.

Nicodemus was tall, athletic, and possessed a demeanour that many a young lady had found agreeable. But he was also a doctor, and what was more, a specialist in Babylonian psychopathology. His vanity was thus qualified by the knowledge that, like all her kind, she was attracted less by a man's physical attributes than his power, authority and willingness to dominate, all of which was symbolized by *money*. When Cat offered the opinion that Nicodemus was 'handsome' she referred to the underlying, totemic potency of Mammon, not to the man.

"A proper hazard to a girl's health, you are," she added.

"Indeed?"

"Handsome is as handsome does. By their works ye shall know

them." She blinked, slowly, like someone stunned by a short, sharp slap. "You've certainly done a job on *me*."

"I'm flattered, but I rather think your seizure had more to do with the V.I.P."

"The Very Important Person?" She smiled, a hint of the old shyness introducing a few brushstrokes of contrast to her new but limited palette of coquetry. "Is that what *you* are, sir?" she added, eyelashes wildly a-flutter. "A Very Important Person?" The lashes froze in mid-beat, like the black, powdery wings of a cataplectic butterfly.

He turned away from her and looked out through the hansom's side window into the night. "You *have* been drinking junket, haven't you?" Landaus, berlines, hansom cabs and growlers lined the kerbside, clogging the thoroughfare as far as Brook Street.

"Just a glass," she said, guiltily.

He nodded and then narrowed his eyes, enquiring into the fog that had begun to swirl and eddy about the square. He was certain that the two men inside the hansom parked on the other side of the road were the same two who had observed him enter Lord Ribblesdale's house an hour ago. He could see them quite distinctly, and was aware that they could just as easily spy on him.

He turned and gazed down the road towards Park Lane. Not more than a dozen paces away, just before all disappeared behind the pall of fog, a man stood between one hansom and another, locked in embrace with an expensive-looking whore. It was such an obvious undercover tactic that Nicodemus could almost believe that the couple were deliberately trying to insult his intelligence.

"V.I.P. stands for Vasoactive Intestinal Peptide," he said, trying to remain calm as he considered his options. Lord Ribblesdale was, of course, a member of the Black Order, like himself. Nicodemus had that evening delivered a message to him drawn-up by the twelve members of the Black Order's high council. It had urged Ribblesdale to decamp to Babylon, where he would be safe and, more importantly, unable to further compromise his brothers with his notorious displays of indiscretion. It seemed to Nicodemus he might well have been too late.

Ribblesdale was obviously watched by the Security Service, whose agents – or 'bullies', as the men of the Black Order called them – were perhaps that night readying to effect an arrest. But he knew that it was just as possible that his own cover had been blown. If it had, it would be he who would have to escape, and as quickly as possible.

He drummed his fingers on his thigh and continued with his impromptu lecture.

"It is a neuro-transmitter, the body chemical that transmits messages of sexual arousal to the female brain."

"Oh," she said, in realization. "You're talking about *catnip*."

He nodded, happy for the moment to accommodate her. "*Jezebel's Junket* contains a highly concentrated dose of V.I.P. Certainly enough to precipitate non-genital orgasm." He kept his gaze trained on the man and woman.

The man was looking askance, visibly squinting at him, even though his mouth and the woman's were still locked in osculatory combat. "*Pornae*, such as yourself, of course, instinctively avoid genital, orgasmic sex because it leads to the adult world and the thing, perhaps, you fear more than anything else: womanhood. Your own sexuality is fundamentally infantile and autoerotic. Perhaps that is why junket is so popular with you."

The couple posing as whore and whore's johnnie disengaged from their intimacies. The man walked to the front of the hansom and opened its two angled folding doors. Taking the woman's hand, he proceeded to help her into the cab, then climbed in after her, sat down and glanced over the tops of the big, wooden-spoked wheels towards Nicodemus.

Nicodemus held the man's stare. And as he did so, he understood that his suspicions were all true and that he was in mortal danger. The agent seemed to enter into a similar understanding, and the two men were bonded, to the effect that one immediately reached up towards the small trapdoor in the cab's roof that facilitated driver-passenger communication, and the other reached under the lapel of his frock-coat, fingers curling about the butt of the recoil operated .38 Colt Automatic, the revolutionary new gun Nicodemus had had imported for just such a contingency as this. It fired an ACP round that had velocity and energy levels far superior to that offered by the unwieldy Borchardt pistols used by the Security Service.

Perched high on his seat at the back of the cab, the hansom's driver took up the reins that were threaded through supports on the roof and urged his horse forward.

Nicodemus leaned forward and rapped the brougham's front

window with his knuckles. His own driver turned contrapposto, a slim, fair-haired young man who had hoped to enter the Black Order, but who as yet had only proved worthy of being admitted to the ranks of its extensive support network.

"Be ready to leave, Sebastian, but wait until I give the word. I believe we may have some trouble on our hands. We seem to have attracted the attention of the bullies." The driver frowned, nodded and resumed his position, his hands surreptitiously grasping the two sets of reins that had been resting in his lap.

The hansom drew alongside.

Nicodemus took Cat roughly by the arm and threw her sideways so that she lay half on, half off the seat, her skirt rucked up about her knees to reveal satin petticoats, drawers and white silk stockings with horizontal pink stripes.

"Get your head down," he said, as he drew the Colt Auto from its shoulder holster. She tried to sit up, but at the sight of the sleek, nickel-plated handgun, voiced a silent "Oh!" and rolled onto the floor. Huddled in a corner with her arms about her calves, she looked up at him, eyes wide with fear.

He pointed the Colt at the hansom's left window. The man who sat behind it had turned his head, making a passing show of looking into Nicodemus's own carriage, as if to satisfy some impulse of idle curiosity. If he saw the Colt, he did not register surprise (he had hardly been afforded the time). Instead, as the gun barked and spat out a plume of flame, he was unmasked for what he was: a man whose appointment with death would leave his curiosity unsatisfied forever.

Nicodemus heard Cat scream. He glanced at the carriage floor. Her bonnet was showered with splinters of glass; her shoulders had risen to her ears, over which she had cupped her hands; and she shook, like a child beset by night terrors.

The shattered windows of the two carriages were an almost perfect copy of each other, the frame of the hansom's unique in one respect alone, decorated as it was with a pink, filigree rim of brain tissue.

He had yelled out to Sebastian even as he had fired. The driver was



quick to respond. The brougham rolled off the kerb and accelerated down Grosvenor Square towards Brook Street.

He rose from the seat, took a step forward, crouched and looked tentatively through the window's jagged remains. Behind him, the stricken cab stood in the middle of the road like a massive, abandoned packing case, its own driver having jumped down onto the cobbles to render aid to the woman who had survived her partner's foolhardiness. And then driver, woman, cab and the dead item of cargo it bore, disappeared behind the curtain of rapidly thickening fog. But just as they did, the other hansom emerged clattering in pursuit, its own complement of secret service agents reaping the reward of a more patient surveillance.

Cat was still screaming.

"Be quiet," he said, firmly.

She looked at him from between splayed fingers. "Oh my God, who *are* you?" she said.

"I am a knight of the Black Order," he said, thinking he might well have to use her as a hostage, or, if she had an appetite for treachery – and he reminded himself of the weakness of womankind and its natural predilection for treachery – to press her into helping him before the night was through. He sat down on the seat, close to the window, and inspected the Colt.

"You're a Ripper," she said, hardly able to speak. She put a hand to her throat, as if to allay its constriction. "You're a *murderer*." She drew her knees under her chin.

"I am *not* a murderer," he said, even though he had just killed a man: something he had never done before and that was contrary to his code of honour. "I have taken the lives of thousands: tens of thousands, to be exact. But –" He refrained from offering further explanation. This was, after all, no time to discourse on moral philosophy and the dialectics of mass gynocide. He was a black knight, and believed a man was defined by his deeds, not his words. "Listen to me: I am not going to hurt you. I only ask that you try to refrain from screaming, crying, babbling, or otherwise evincing symptoms of feminine distress. It simply *destroys* my concentration."

Subsumed by the fog, the agents were yet audible, their conveyance betrayed by the rattle of its axle and wheels and the complaints of a horse labouring beneath the whip. The statue of William Pitt that stood by Hanover Square loomed out of the fog and then disappeared. "Do you understand?" he concluded as he drew back his head and gazed down at her. She briskly nodded.

And then he stared deep, deep into her eyes, as if he would uncover her soul. Not that girls such as her possessed souls. Her life source was the feminine daemonic: the animating principle of those who should not be alive, but rather belonged to the inorganic world of dolls. The rumble, hoots and alarums of the fog-shrouded city receded. They were alone, like children on a trip to the seaside whom the adults have left in the charabanc, forgotten, while they attend to their own louder, more vulgar concerns.

The moment was not to last. Snapped out of his contemplative fit by the blare of a horn, he stuck his head out of the window and saw the hansom's gig-lamps staring out of the fog. His enemies were closing fast.

"Sebastian!" he shouted, screwing his neck about so that his voice might carry above the roar of the wheels. "You have been briefed. I take it you remember where you are to take us!"

"Yes, sir, of course, sir – Charing Cross Station!"

"Good man!"

The brougham was turning into Regent Street and heading

south towards Piccadilly. A Trans-World Express left for Babylon from Charing Cross every night at 11:30 p.m. If he stood opposite platform five at eleven o'clock sharp as his Controller had told him to do he would be recognized and certain unknown parties would smuggle him on board.

"I don't suppose it would be possible to find one of the Order's interdimensional gates, sir?" said Sebastian as he cracked the reins. "The bullies will have their eyes on the station."

"Our old gates have been closed down, dear boy, by friends of the gentlemen who are currently making such a nuisance of themselves to our rear."

"All of them, sir?"

"Yes, all, Sebastian. Babylon is once again almost hermetically sealed, as it was centuries ago, before the Order began its operations." And if the Security Service consolidates its recent successes, he thought bitterly, Babylon might well again become the all-female world it was of old.

He reached into his fob pocket, pulled out his solid gold hunter and flipped it open. It was ten-fifteen: still plenty of time to make the rendezvous, if only he could shake off his pursuers. If that proved impossible, and he missed his connection, he would need a bolthole, he decided, somewhere to hide until he could be smuggled on board another interdimensional train and reach the safety of that place where no men were allowed, and only young women who had dedicated themselves to Ishtar could dispute or testify to his presence, and then, of course, only too late.

As the brougham passed Conduit Street the fog parted like stage curtains and an omnibus materialized, as if at the behest of a particularly ambitious illusionist. The high, steel wall of coachwork and the faces of passengers mute with shock declared that the trick was doomed to end in disaster.

A passer-by cried out a warning, the voice, ascending into a shriek, soon lost to a terrible equine chorus. Nicodemus planted his boot on the opposing bulkhead and braced himself, the glass window that divided cabin from the coachman's seat offering the prospect of multiple lacerations if he should be propelled forward upon impact.

But when the impact came, he felt nothing.

Later, he decided that, though he had not been cut, he must nevertheless have hit his head, because for an indeterminate time he had not only felt nothing, but seen and heard nothing, too. (For some seconds after reviving, he had had trouble recalling his own name.) When his memory and powers of cognizance returned, he realized that he was lying on the carriage floor looking up through the front window, its glass having joined the shards that had littered the interior when he had blown out the brains of his first human male. His vision was blurred. He blinked, and then blinked again, struggling to focus. It seemed the brougham had ploughed into the staircase at the rear of the bus. The mangled bodies of Sebastian and the horse, dead in its traces, festooned its cruel, iron volute.

He felt a hand touch his forehead. Turning as best he could, he saw that the side door of the brougham was wide open and that Cat was outside, stooped over, looking in at him. "Are you all right?" she said. Her eyes filled with pity. "I'm so sorry," she added, as if the world, expecting an apology of her at birth, was finally translating that expectation into a demand.

"Stand aside," called a voice.

He looked past Cat. The two secret service agents stood in front of their hansom, pistols drawn. As he attempted to sit up they

adopted a two-handed firing position. He flopped back onto the floor and grimaced. His left shoulder, it seemed, was dislocated, or perhaps even broken.

He stared into Cat's eyes. "Better do as the man says." Even as a boy her kind had enslaved him. He looked deeper, not (or so he carefully reminded himself) into windows of the soul, but into mirrors that reflected his own dark, lonely passion. And the boy in him cried out, humiliated and in pain.

"No," she whispered. "I won't let them hurt you."

Assuming a life of its own, his mouth twisted itself into a smile. He looked up. Her eyes had misted, their childlike ingenuousness thrown into relief by the banal trumpery of the thickly painted eyelids and lashes. "You know what I am," he said, smiling. "Do as they say. Step aside."

"Please, Miss," shouted one of the agents. "You're placing yourself in great danger."

"Step aside," hissed Nicodemus.

"I won't," said Cat, placing her hands on her hips and striking an attitude that, in other circumstances, might have had people calling her a 'little madam'.

"You must," he said.

"No," she said. "They'd kill you."

"I'd kill you," he said more stridently, but not so that anybody other than Cat might hear. "Don't you know that?" He summoned up what strength he had. "Go!"

She stared back at him defiantly.

"His kind are cowards," said the agent who had taken upon himself the role of negotiator, unaware that other, far stranger, negotiations were going on between kidnapper and abductee. "Oh yes, they kill on Babylon. They are big, brave men when they have only little girls to contend with. But this is Earth Prime. Don't be frightened, Miss. Move to one side and let us do our job."

"Is he armed, Miss?" said the other agent, nervously. "Does he still have his gun?"

"It's them that are the cowards," whispered Cat as she placed her palm gently on Nicodemus's brow like a nurse soothing a feverish patient.

"And you are intrepid," he said, laughing gently. "Certainly braver than me."

"Not really," she said. "I've always been a *scaredy* cat. It's just that –"

"A coward and a hypocrite," the agent-negotiator continued. "You killed a man tonight, gynocide. According to your twisted reckoning, that constitutes a crime. Show some compunction. Surrender yourself."

"That was indeed unfortunate," Nicodemus shouted back, "if unavoidable. The Black Order will defend itself, no matter what. I am prepared to yield, but I demand that you treat me as a political prisoner. Do you accept?"

There was no reply.

He looked up at Cat. "This is no time to use up your nine lives," he said, "It's over. Leave me. But before you do..."

"Yes?" she said. A big tear welled up in the corner of her left eye.

"You are the most beautiful..." His brow knitted beneath her cool hand. "You are..." His mouth turned down. But he sneered at himself, not her. There was poison in his heart and he knew that it was too late in life to do anything but succumb to it. "The bully

calls his doxy," he concluded, his voice hoarse with weariness. "Run to him, slut."

"But I'm not his slut," said Cat, her voice rising a little. She trembled like a scolded child too proud to cry. "I'm yours."

He was a boy again. He stood at a fork in the path that led to manhood. And it seemed that he had been sent back in time in order that he might take another road and arrive at a place where the past was redeemed and not avenged.

Her cheeks were like lustrous red apples. He reached upwards and touched them, first one and then the other, his fingertips testing the soft, tear-streaked flesh and discovering that the hot consistency of her sorrow was the same as his own.

"You'll have a chance to make speeches at the Bailey," the agent continued. "Throw out your gun."

"Do as he says," said the other man. "Your so-called revolutionary struggle is not only evil it is plainly absurd. What can you hope to achieve that has not been achieved already? Babylon gives us everything. For the first time in history the world is at peace!"

Nicodemus knew the arguments. There had not been war in over a hundred years, ever since, in fact, Babylon had made its presence known and established its pornocratic world government.

"Yes, there is peace," Nicodemus called back.

"Babylon placates the male exterminating principle. It celebrates the *hieros gamos* that keeps Satan locked up in his pit. But if we have no war, then we have no art, philosophy and music, either. You call us lust murderers, but we are all that is left of what was once a great Apollonian civilization. You call us deranged because the masculine intellect can no longer find expression in a Newton, Mozart, Hegel or Goethe, but only in their necessarily asocial equivalents. But I tell you this: we madmen offer the world its only hope of salvation from *meretriciousness*. Our revolutionary struggle will therefore continue.

Only when we forge a new relationship between male and female in cruelty, pain and blood will civilization be reborn."

"Save it for your trial, gynocide," the agent responded. "Or the priest."

"For the last time, Miss," cried his partner, "step aside!"

What a little anarchy she is, he thought, as Cat ignored them and instead stepped forward and climbed inside the carriage.

Despite his perilous situation, he still found time to appreciate her prodigious cleavage, which, due to her stooped posture and obvious addiction to tight-lacing, was more than advantageously displayed.

"Use me," she said. She extricated the gun from the glass splinters that carpeted the floor and then, taking his right hand, placed it in his palm. His fingers twitched and closed over the butt, the forefinger snaking about the trigger. "I want to be your prisoner." She leaned forward and kissed him succinctly upon the lips. "Use me as a shield," she concluded, withdrawing a little, but with her face still close enough to his for him to feel her damp, warm breath and taste her vulgar perfume.

With one arm hanging limp, and the other effectively disabled by playing nursemaid to the Colt – the gun seemed like an old, convalescing friend whose days of pointing at offending pieces of animate flesh and punching large holes in them might well be over – he pulled himself up onto the seat. With bowed head and hunched shoulders he shuffled towards the open door, gaze fixed



upon the pretty, beseeching face of his demoness turned guardian angel, until, spurred as much, perhaps, by desire as by a sense of self-preservation, he reached out and embraced her waist.

He flipped her about and pushed her forward. Together, they stepped gingerly out of the carriage. "Don't shoot!" cried Cat. "Please, please, don't shoot!" He held her before him, his arm traversing her ribcage so that the Colt's muzzle nestled against the underside of her bosom.

"It would be wise to heed her advice," he said, gaze alternating between the agents directly in front of him and the crowd of onlookers that had gathered on either side. "Or you'll have one more dead whore on your conscience."

On Earth Prime, the Babylonian sacred prostitute – no matter how inconsequential her caste – was a representative of the Goddess, to whom all were in thrall.

"Hold your fire," said the agent who had, until now, assumed command. "The girl..." He lowered his weapon and then, lightly patting the barrel of the other man's pistol, prevailed upon him to do the same.

Nicodemus swung Cat first in one direction, and then in another, each time presenting his adversaries and the attendant crowd with the mute argument of the political, cultural and religious imperatives of the Code of Hammurabi, which few men dared question.

The spectators, whose number had increased as the drama unfolded, began congregating about them, seemingly indifferent to everything but the morbid fascination the desperate couple inspired.

Nicodemus walked crabwise and then, having cleared the wrecked brougham, slowly backwards into the encircling crowd. His hold on Cat tightened; her feet pedalled in the air; and as they breached the outlying ring of voyeurs he was pleased to learn that they were inspiring not only fascination, but also panic. The crowd began to disperse. At first half-heartedly, not able to quite believe that the spectacle of a black knight run to ground in London's heartland was anything more than an entertainment that had leapt from the pages of a shilling shocker. But then, as doubt and unease spread through King Mob's ranks, men, women and children scattered in earnest. Some disappeared into Conduit Street, others swarmed across the main thoroughfare where they knocked the agents onto their backs and trampled them. Seizing the opportunity, Nicodemus threw Cat over his shoulder and broke into a loping run. And then he, too, was fleeing down Conduit Street, his right arm under her skirt and holding her about the backs of her knees.

"People will say we're courting," he said, addressing her bouncing rump with bleak gaiety. "Have I properly introduced myself? I fear I have been remiss. My name is Peter. Peter Nicodemus."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mr Nicodemus. But I'll call you 'sir', if you don't mind. My temple insists on it." For a catgirl, a man was a generalization, and as such, anonymous, little more than a host for a greater, and wholly abstract, power. "Besides, I'm just a mopsie, and you're, like, a *gent*." Gentleman Death, she thought, with a shiver of trepidation and pleasure. Lord Satan incarnate. Twisting about, she looked up at him from the level of his hip and recited her whore's *résumé*: "I'm Cat St Cat, *pornae*, sixteen years old, hair blonde, eyes blue, height five feet two inches, weight one-hundred and five pounds, measurements –"

"Sixteen?" he said. But how long had she been sixteen? It made little sense to quiz a *pornae* half-breed about her age. Not, that is, if you were actually concerned about how many years she had spent on Earth. "Are you *transubstantiate*?" he continued, using

the term Babylon had borrowed to incorporate the emergence of *mutandum* into its theology. "Has your age been hysterized, or are you still subject to Time?" He groaned. The steel busk that lined the front of her corset was digging into his clavicle.

"I haven't had my moment, if that's what you mean," said Cat, abashed, like a callow girl who admits to having never been kissed. "Not yet. All my friends have. But –"

"It will doubtless come soon," he said. But not tonight, he thought. Don't let it be tonight. Once the hysteria – which had been consolidating its hold on her since she had been a child – achieved its goal and sealed her destiny, she would become predictable only in her impulsiveness. She would refuse to delay gratification. She would be little more than a spoilt, often sulky, child, who desired, grasped, threw away, and exploited men without guilt. She would be morally insane, the living embodiment of the hysterical modern world.

That she had not had her moment was, perhaps, the sole reason she had helped him.

He ran on, intent on melding with London's million and the obscurity of the fog-bound night.

"I love being a whore," said Cat softly as she and Nicodemus passed St James's Hall and headed towards Piccadilly Circus. She glanced up at him, and if she still struggled with her insurmountable shyness, something prompted her to essay a flutter of the lashes, a rolling of the eyes, a lascivious chewing of the lower lip that were becoming instinctive, supplanting the learnt, more academic gestures that constituted her usual repertoire of coquetry. "Prostitution is a vocation," she added, like the schoolgirl she had recently been. "A calling, you might say."

Nicodemus was out of breath. He seemed incapable of offering a reply. The effort of transporting a small, but inordinately pneumatic, young lady down Saville Row and then Sackville Street, like a Roman carrying off one of Rubens' Sabines, had exhausted him. The effort had, however, secured a temporary respite. The hue and cry, for the moment at least, had abated and they eluded attention, as inconspicuous as the other couples up and down Piccadilly: gentlemen who appeared out of and then as quickly disappeared into the fog, urged to a place of assignation by their Babylonian companions.

He rubbed his left shoulder. It had almost made her sick, watching him snap it back into place; but he was a doctor, she had told herself; he knew what he was doing; and anyway, she was grateful that the injury had not proved more serious.

"Do you want to hear a story?" she said, desperate to win his attention and keep his arm inextricably linked with her own. Whatever else might transpire, she was determined to keep hold of a man who, unique amongst his sex, possessed the gift of making her feel like a true harlot. "It's about a little girl called Estella." Still he said nothing, content, it seemed, to have fate carry him along Piccadilly towards the train station where he would embark for Babylon and never think upon her again. She dragged her feet, hoping to slow his pace. "Estella lived in Bethnal Green. When she was seven years old she began to play a game. She and her sister, Felicity, who was three years younger than her, would take their dolls from their toy chest, dress them up in pretty rags, and play 'catgirls'. Later, Estella and Felicity began to dress up, too. 'We're catgirls', they would say."

"And boys?" he interrupted, suddenly.

"They would give us sweets," she said. "And, and –" Her voice cracked.

"It excites you, doesn't it, then as now – the transaction?"

"I don't know what you mean," she said, staring determinedly at the pavement.

"When a man hands you money, it sexually excites you – the transaction is as important, or more important, than coition."

"That came later," said Cat, more quietly. "After I had my first –"

"After you became a woman," he said. "And a whore."

She winced, remembering when she had lain next to Felicity in bed shortly after she had begun going to the big school. "Why do you want to volunteer?" her sister had asked her. And she had replied: "Because I don't want to be a woman." "Ever?" "No. Not ever. I want to be a girl. I always want to be a girl!" But Nicodemus had called her a woman. And so keen was the sense of insult, she bridled, however unwise it might be to quibble with a man who had the blood of so many of her kind on his hands.

"Girl. Whore. I thought you said that they're the same thing?" She tsked. "I ask you, how can I be a woman if I'm a whore?"

"Continue with your story," he said with an equanimity that surprised her. "And be sure I shall try to refrain from using the word 'woman' in your infinitely girlish presence again."

On the other side of the street St James's Church emerged out of the fog, a neo-gothic pile decorated with the banners and pennants of a new religion that had elevated the Magdalene above Christ and Ishtar above God the Father.

"Even before she had volunteered for service," she said, as she complied with his request and continued the account of her childhood, "people had called Estella 'Cat'. And now Estella took that name to heart, because more than anything else, she wanted to be a catgirl. Wanted it so much, she began to change."

"You were diagnosed as *mutandum*, a half-breed, or sexual hysteric."

"Yes," she said. "That's right. A mutie."

"Classical hysteria," he said, like a man given to riding his hobbyhorse until it dropped from exhaustion, "was a psychoneurosis in which repressed complexes became dissociated from the personality and manifested themselves as physical symptoms, such as tics, paralysis, blindness and deafness. But the contemporary variety directly impacts upon physical development, giving rise to neoplastic changes that result in a hystericized, reshaped body."

Of course, she thought. He was a man of science. He had studied Babylonian philtres, poisons, potions and herbs. And if he knew about things like catnip, then he might be expected to have been initiated into the greater Babylonian mysteries and probably knew all there was to know about catgirls, too.

"I was a born whore," she said, trying to summon to mind other details of her medical condition that might stimulate his further interest.

"All human females are born whores," he said. "But you are different. You are, or soon will be, a *perfect* whore: one who takes as much pleasure from selling herself as from submitting to the most abject of intimacies."

"Well," said Cat, unceasingly surprised at how forward she had become. "I wouldn't be much of a whore if I didn't, would I?" She giggled, nervously.

"Continue," he said.

She swallowed, and tried to marshal her thoughts.

"One day at school, Estella opened her desk and discovered a little pamphlet. Someone – one of the boys, perhaps – had placed it there so that she might find it. She knew she should hand it in to the headmistress. But she kept hold of it all the same, even though she knew it was against the law."

The silence deepened, alleviated only by the clatter of wheels over cobbles and the clip-clop of phantom hooves. She had left her redingote at Lord Ribblesdale's house, but despite the inclemency of the fog, she was flushed, both from the recent excitement of the chase, and the fact that her skirts – tied back around the knees to expose the contours of hip and thigh – sought to immobilize her, making each step an effort.

"Later, at home, she read the pamphlet. It explained why the men of the Black Order would kill her if she chose to be confirmed and take her first communion or stepped upon Babylonian soil." She paused for dramatic effect. "It was because she was a *fetish*."

"A commodity fetish," he said, correcting her. "The catgirl is a hysterical reification of a commodity culture, the embodiment of the worldwide pornocracy that is Babylon." He seemed familiar with the pamphlet. "She is part of a harem that engage – and by means of seduction, engage the whole world – in an orgy of endless, meretricious consumption..." He shook his head and smiled. "The men of the Black Order argue that a catgirl is 'morally insane', degenerate, in effect little more than an animal. Or let us say, something between an animal and a thing: a fetish."

Cat nodded, even though she was unsure of exactly what she might be agreeing with, certain only that she wished to hear his voice, be close to him and win his favour.

"After that, Estella started to notice other things. Like the graffiti outside the school: THOUT SHALL NOT SUFFER A GIRL TO LIVE."

"But, of course, that did not dissuade her."

"No," she said. "I told you. Estella was a whore."

She'd always been a whore. Estella *had* to go to Babylon." The faint smile that hung on her lips threatened to turn into an emblem of despair. "Estella couldn't bear the idea of growing up. She wanted to be a pink girl. She wanted to live the pink life."

"A life without responsibilities," he said, "devoted to one's own appetites and pleasure."

She came to an abrupt stop. They stood beneath the recently erected Shaftesbury Memorial. And in the green lamplight, it might have been an idol Sir Richard Burton had discovered while trekking through the steamy mists of a continent as dark and alien as the central Babylonian landmass.

"I used to be good at school," she said, looking about her confusedly. "I was good at art, and music and even history." What was she doing here, she thought? In the middle of London on a foggy night, being squired to God-knows-where by a notorious murderer? What had she ever been doing that her life had dovetailed into such a niche as this, wedged tight, careless of whether she might ever again be free, but strangely happy? "I say *used* to be good. After I was inducted into the novitiate..." Oh, if only she'd done her homework instead of skipping off to the Dilly! She so wanted to impress him.

Frantically, she delved into the ruins of her unbalanced mind:

When the Persians had destroyed the old, Mesopotamian Babylon, Ishtar's temple prostitutes had retreated into another world. She remembered that. And, over centuries, that secret, parallel world also



came to be known as Babylon. She remembered that, too. Likewise, that Babylon's whores – the Queen of Sheba and Cleopatra, for instance – would subsequently visit, recruit from, and subvert Earth Prime. (At school, in the special lessons given to Babylonian novices, she had always enjoyed learning about Cleopatra, the most infamous fellatrix of the ancient world. Miss Wanda had said that the Greeks had called her Merichane, or 'Gaper'. And she was also known as Cheilon, or 'Thick-Lipped': the queen who had felled a hundred Roman noblemen in one night.) And then of course there was Salome, Mary Magdalene, Theodora, and representing the modern world, Lucretia Borgia, Catherine Howard, Nell Gwyn, the Marquise de Brinvilliers, Charlotte Corday, and... oh, so many famous succubi, so many martyrs whose names she had chalked on her slate. They seduced and made slaves of princes and prelates, artists and scientists, and – calling upon their sex-magick – fornicated their way into history and changed it, until, by the end of the eighteenth century, they were ready to make their presence known and assume guardianship of Earth Prime.

She couldn't remember anything more.

"These days, I only seem to be able to think about money and sex," she concluded, and looked up at the winged boy with the bow and quiver of arrows whom she had heard people call 'Eros'.

Piccadilly looked very strange to Cat, stranger than it ever had before, and she wondered how a place she knew so well could be so unfamiliar. It was different, she decided, because the world itself was different.

Nothing would look the same now that she had met Nicodemus.

"Sometimes I feel...lonely," she whispered, as she continued to stare at Eros, the beautiful boy who had transfixed her with his arrow. "Sad, too." She leaned her head against Nicodemus's upper arm. "It might sound silly, but sometimes I feel that whoring isn't enough. It's almost as if there's a better life out there, something more beautiful than I could ever imagine."

Standing at the hub of empire – the great pornography that spanned the world and which was administered by another world called Babylon – she was seized by a sense of loss that was as vast as it was incommunicable. Whoring not make you happy? But how could that be, she thought? The world was a brothel. Sex was money. Sex was power. She had known that ever since a little girl called Estella had asked her mother for face-paint and a corset.

Abstractedly, her murderous beau gazed up at the memorial statue, as if he too was unsure of where he was and sought some kind of marker.

"I have to get to Charing Cross," he said, dreamily. "I have to get to Babylon."

She tugged at his sleeve. "My dancing saloon is nearby," she said, nodding towards Great Windmill Street. "You could hide there, if you like. The girls have a dormitory upstairs that they use when they've been on the blue ruin and can't get home. I'll say you're a johnnie. My johnnie. No one will mind."

"No," he said.

"But..." She frantically sought to think of an argument that might entice and convince him that his destiny – whatever tomorrow might bring – lay in spending the night in her arms. "At the back of my saloon there's, well, an alley," she ventured, not for the first time taken aback by her own growing boldness. "It's better out there: more private, more romantic." She opened her purse, reached into it and produced her registration card. "I'm not nymphie or nuffink," she said, betraying her East End origins in

her enthusiasm to prove herself. She brandished the card, waving it before his eyes. "Look!"

Syphilis was no more. Babylonian science had banished it, along with all other venereal diseases – all, that is, except the Babylonian disease called *nympholepsy*. Some dolly-mops boasted of being nymphs; they believed it lent them a worldly cachet; besides which, it had the effect of making slaves of men, inducing chronic priapism, satyriasis and spermatorrhoea before it literally drove them mad. Cat despised such girls. She could never feel proud of being a vector for a communicable disease no matter how satisfying its consequences.

He ignored her. She tucked the card back into her purse, closed its hasp, and stared straight ahead at the faces that swam out of the fog: men who had the sallow, hollow-eyed look of nympholepts, and catgirls who possessed the feverish, consumptive glow of nymphs. Trash was a nymph, of course. And Cat wondered if she would at last come to envy – if the night proved long enough – not only her friend's utter shamelessness, but also her ability and willingness to make men sick.

"Nice plate of ham, darling?" said one of the passing streetwalkers to Nicodemus.

"Buy a girl a stiff drink?" said another.

If habitat and mating cries had not been enough to betray their caste, then their complexions would have confirmed the matter.

Unlike *horae* – whose distaff inheritance betrayed the burnishing effects of the Babylonian moon – they were almost consumptively pale, as indeed were all dolly-mops who worked the Dilly.

"Don't take any notice of them," whispered Cat, clinging to his arm and aggressively pushing out her chest. The dress-bodice (fashioned in the outdated 'cuirasse style') forced her bosom upwards, like some feature of anatomical exposition, and created a pillow of heaving, quivering flesh. "Come back to *Little Miss Muffet's*. It's ever so near, really it is. Look – it's just across the road!" He lengthened his stride, and she struggled to keep up with him. "But why not?" she said, her voice dry with frustration. "Don't you like the Dilly?" Why did a man like him so torment himself, she wondered? "Stay with me. It's nice here. It's fun. It's pornotopia! There are dancing saloons, gin palaces, clubs – really, there's *everything*. And, and –" She remembered what she had been taught in school and what the bully had said back in Regent Street. "There's no war!" she added. "Babylon girls don't like Tommy Atkins. They like Tommy Fuck." And what was wrong with that, she thought? "I know you must *believe* in what you're doing, and I know there're a lot of things I don't understand, but..."

He turned into Haymarket.

"I told you before," he said, shaking his jowls as if he meant to clear his head of despondency, "no *Babel*."

The shriek of the whistle filled the station, echoing off iron girders, stone columns and the huge, overarching glass roof.

"It seems that this is the train I am supposed to catch, though how I am to be smuggled on board with all this activity going on is, I must say, something of an unwelcome mystery." He looked left, then right, scanning the milling crowd with suspicious, fretful eyes.

They stood inside the concourse of Charing Cross station opposite platform five. Several hearses were parked nearby. On the platform itself, the weeping representatives of bereaved families, accompanied by undertakers and police constables, were

attending to the business of sorting through hundreds of glass coffins in the hope of recovering the remains of their loved ones. The coffins – and there were still some being unloaded from the freight cars – were stacked four or five high and strewn along the platform's length, each one displaying a girl in a wedding dress and veil, young, beautiful and damned.

"Why do you *do* it?" said Cat. There was pain in her voice, a quality he could no longer choose to ignore. It was the sad leitmotif that haunted both her life and his own. Unsettled, he fixed his gaze upon the platform, unwilling to think upon a female heart as anything other than something duty called upon him to still.

It was absurd to stand in full view of everybody. And yet how else might the brother knight assigned to his rescue identify him? He had never seen or met the man, the green carnation that he wore as a *boutonnière* – one of the Order's more hermetic distress signals – his sole hope of establishing contact.

"Why do you send the cadavers back to Earth?" persisted Cat.

"We are not barbarians," he replied, taking up the thread of their conversation like a man who will accept a game of draughts or chess while biding his time in the condemned cell, but cannot be expected to enjoy it, "no matter what you may have been told."

"They call you incendiaries," she said.

"Libertines. Nihilists."

He gave a wry smile. "Nihilism: the rejection of all traditional values, authority and institutions that uphold pornocratic absolutism. A course of action for those who, despairing of reform, see change as possible only through a new *hieros gamos*."

"A black wedding," she said, softly.

He nodded. "Between death and the maiden." He grabbed her elbow and walked forward, steering her towards the platform gates, struggling to hide his impatience and fear behind the mask of his customary *sang-froid*.

"What would they do to you?" she said. Her voice had grown smaller so that it seemed to come from as far away as Babylon itself, and perhaps even as far away as the lands of the feminine dead. "If they caught you, I mean."

They stood against the gates. He cast his gaze over the glass coffins that receded into the distance.

"I would be sentenced to hang, of course," he said.

"Would they really do that?"

He marvelled at her doubt. Was she the *ingénue* she seemed, or merely a perfect ninny?

"Of course they would. I have killed. And more than you see here." He set his jaw in appreciation of his brothers' handiwork. "Considerably more."

He leaned over the barrier and studied the dead girl in the glass coffin immediately beneath him. The body, of course, had been perfectly embalmed. Its cold beauty would never decay. The morticians of the Black Order knew the secret of turning a beautiful corpse into a still more beautiful doll.

She was a brunette, her chignon adorned with a black, funereal ribbon. Her veil was held in place by a wreath of tiny artificial roses and poppies. The smoky gauze revealed a mouth that was a bruised plum and sealed eyes painted a dusky shade of midnight. The knee-length scarlet gown – its skirts swollen with

net petticoats and froufrou – filled up the coffin like a monstrous orchid set to burst from the confines of a hothouse. Ankle boots, black silk stockings decorated with clocks in the shape of wedding bells, lace evening gloves, and a rosary entwined about her fingers and held to her breast (just beneath the necklace and silver crucifix), completed her trousseau – one copied by every other girl who, on Babylon, had had the misfortune of suffering such a fatal *mésalliance*.

He felt Cat's warm, living body nestle against his own, as if she were intent on contradicting the fate of her sisters by transfusing evidence of her own vitality into the representative body of one of their murderers.

"You helped me," he said, putting his arm about her waist. "Why?"

"I don't know," she said. "I –"

"The Black Order is dedicated to exterminating your kind. In other circumstances –"

"No," she whispered. "Don't say it. Please." She pressed her cheek against his arm. He got out his hunter. It was a quarter past eleven.

He inspected the concourse. Several eunuchs had appeared.

Eunuchs were the most dedicated of Ishtar's slaves and, of all the Black Order's enemies, the most implacable. He tried to relax.

Even half-men, he told himself, weren't allowed onto the holy soil of Babylon. Once aboard the train, he would be safe.

"To you, I'm just a fetish, aren't I?" said Cat, her voice tremulous, aggrieved. The eunuchs walked past them and proceeded towards the stationary hearses.

He breathed deep and – in an attempt to camouflage his mounting anxiety – gazed down at her, a man like any other man momentarily distracted by a pretty little catgirl.

She was still hot from their journey. Her dress clung to her breasts and waist, the red paint pots of her nipples bleeding their molten rouge into

the folds and pleats of the sweat-stained *broderie anglaise* that decorated the top of her bodice.

Despite the consequences for his safety, he began to wish that she had had her moment and was transubstantiate, if only that she might always look the way she did now, a perfectly rendered picture of depraved naivety.

To his consternation the 'pretty little catgirl' seemed suddenly to possess a significance as appalling as it was profound.

"You are the *fin de siècle*," he mused. She was that and more. She was the end of all things. Soon, she would become a creature of pure instinct: vain, caring only for her own pleasure, motivated solely by cupidity and narcissism, and devoid of concern for the future or past. Experience, no matter how radical, would be as powerless to modify her personality as Nature would be to alter her flesh. She would live in an Eternal Present whose only lasting quality would be its affectlessness. "I think perhaps your moment is almost open you."

"There's only one moment I really care about," she countered, "and that's the moment we met." She looked up as if to better display the little salty pearls that had formed in the corner of each eye. "I'm crazy about you." The tears welled up. "Don't you know that?"

Her eyes closed, she tilted her chin skywards – the great mane of ringlets falling back to reveal the small, pale ears and their cheap,



end-of-the-pier hoop earrings – and offered up the fulsome bud of her mouth, heavy with its glossy burden of coral.

"I want to be your sexcat," she murmured, just before he smothered her. "I want to be your piece of vermin."

He kissed her hard. She retaliated, drawing his tongue from his mouth and into her own, imprisoning it in the soft, wet intimacy of an orifice whose sexual primacy mocked reproduction and thus womanhood itself.

He broke away, taken aback by the terrible simplicity of her ardour and its absence of whorish calculation.

He reminded himself that she was indeed a fetish – one with a few silly, if sometimes affecting pretensions to humanity, perhaps – but a fetish, nevertheless: a capitalist trinket to which the world had formed a pathological sexual attachment. She was without a heart, incapable of forming normal relationships. And yet, and yet ...

She was a girl, too, and young enough to be his daughter – a girl whose aspirations in life, no matter how grotesque, were tinged with a childlike innocence. The glint of wickedness that lurked in the aquamarine depths of her eyes like a bad fairy intent on mischief, and which he found so alluring, was itself innocent, the paradoxical light of a soul in the dock hopelessly compromised and yet successfully entering a plea of extenuating circumstances.

He started, his fingers slipping under the lapel of his frock-coat to settle upon the butt of the Colt.

Someone had tapped him on the shoulder.

He froze in mid-turn. The man who stood behind the barrier had made a certain pass with his hand: the cipher that indicated he was a brother knight.

"You shouldn't draw such attention to yourself," the man said. He wore the uniform of a lowly railway employee, but spoke with an incongruously refined accent. "I hope," he continued, "that whoever may be watching us merely thinks that I am asking a couple of drunken hooligans to leave the station."

"I need to get on that train," said Nicodemus. "Now."

The man was infected with higher-dimensional geometries, his coat, trousers and high-collared shirt unable to hide the alien perspectives that sought to explicate themselves in his flesh. He seemed a corporeal blur, half-in, half-out of this world. Cat swayed giddily, and Nicodemus moved to support her.

"Please, look away if you wish," said the man upon seeing Cat's distress. "The spectacle I present is not one that may be easily borne. I have the Phage. Have you heard of the Phage, little catgirl?"

She swallowed and then nodded. "You get it from working too close to the interdimensional gates."

"Quite so. I have worked the Charing Cross gate for many years. And all so that my fellow knights may have recourse to an escape route, should their lives be in peril." The man cleared his throat and stared pointedly at Nicodemus. "I do not expect thanks. But I do expect co-operation."

"There's no time for this sort of nonsense," said Nicodemus. "Get me aboard the train."

"That is impossible," said his brother knight. "The news of your little *contretemps* with the Security Service has travelled fast." He gazed past Nicodemus and focused on the busy concourse.

"Have I been followed?"

"I don't know. But as you are no doubt aware, we have an unusual amount of eunuchs here tonight." Nicodemus chanced a sly look at the party of white-robed, shaven-headed capons who strutted about the parked hearses. Soon, they would collect the

coffins, sprinkle holy milk on them, check the death certificates and release papers, and then consign the deceased to a necropolis or country churchyard. "I have to open up the platform and let them in. You must leave."

"I can't leave," growled Nicodemus. "I've nowhere to go. I *must* get on that train."

◆ "No," said the man, with quiet determination. "The train is about to depart. It is quite impossible." On cue, the train started up, juddering as it moved away from the buffers. It was one of those that, in earlier times, had taken a contingent of sacred prostitutes off-world, but which had been hijacked before reaching the redoubt of a temple. For the last ten years – equipped with an automatic pilot – it had ferried its morbid cargo from Babylon back to Earth. As the black knights would repeatedly affirm, they were not barbarians. And Her Majesty's government allowed the train to pass between worlds with impunity in return for an assurance that it would only be used to transport the remains of the dead. "Find a place of safety, and then come back tomorrow," the man concluded. ◆ "I know a place where you can stay," said Cat, with some of her old shyness.

Nicodemus turned to her. "You don't understand," he said. "By tomorrow they'll have tracked me down. By tomorrow..." He bit his tongue. His frustration was complete.

◆ "I told you before: you can stay at my dancing saloon." She blushed. "If you want to, that is."

The sound of a whistle cut through the air. The barrier opened; ◆ Nicodemus stepped back; and the first of the coffins was taken from the platform and loaded onto a hearse. He was tempted to rush through. But it was too late. The train was already picking up speed. ◆ At the far end of the platform the interdimensional gate had opened up: a circle of white fire with a heart neither white, nor black, nor any colour of the visible spectrum, but which instead seemed to radiate an absence that entirely confounded the sense of sight. ◆ Sparks flew off the freight cars. Then there was a great flash; the locomotive vanished, passing into the gate's bright, snaggletoothed maw; and as it melded with the nothingness that gave onto the tunnel between worlds, there was a second, more brilliant flash. ◆ Nicodemus shielded his eyes with his hand. He was staying at his aunt Tabitha's country house, in silent love with his pretty but terrifyingly alien little cousin; he was sitting next to the house master who would expound upon the wickedness of Babylon and who had been his only friend; he was at Guy's beginning his studies in Babylonian psychosexual pathology. He looked again. The last car vanished taking his life with it, and the attendant coruscation reminded him of the stars above the Great Western Desert of Edom where, during his first year off-world, he had served as assistant medical officer in Extermination Camp 143.

◆ Babylon, city of eternal night, world sacred to Ishtar: it had been his home for more than half his life. To the West, the Great Desert and Red Sea, to the South the Jungle of Sumer and the lands of Moab and Midian, to the East the mountains of Elam that rose in an unbroken chain past Nineveh, Akkad, Nimrud and into the North to form the spine of the jutting, thousand-mile-long Anatolian Peninsula.

Would he ever see it again?

◆ concludes next issue ◆

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THE LAST REEF by GARETH LYN POWELL

A lone quad bike rattles across the frozen Martian desert, kicking up dust. Riding with the wind at his back, Kenji Shiraki has been on the move since first light. In his oil-stained, dust-covered white insulation suit he looks strangely out of place, conspicuous. Above his breathing mask, his wary eyes scan the horizon, looking for trouble but finding only emptiness. Apart from the domed town up ahead, a few hills beyond, and the faint glow of the Reef's skeleton, there's nothing to disturb the brooding desolation.

He passes through the vehicular airlock into the town's atmospheric dome, and rolls up Main Street with one hand resting on the handlebars. Most of the shops and stores are boarded up; pet dogs sleep in the shade, chickens fuss in the scrub. Suspicious faces watch him pass; there hasn't been a visitor here for months. Midway along the street he pulls up and kills the engine in front of the town's only surviving hotel.

Less than 24 hours, he thinks as he swings his leg off the bike and stiffly climbs the hotel's wooden steps. The Glocks in his pocket bump against his thigh like animals shifting in their sleep. The feeling's both familiar and reassuring. He pulls off his mask and takes a sip of warm water from the canteen on his belt, rinses the all-pervading grit from his mouth, and spits into the dust.

"I'm here for Jaclyn Lubanski," he says.

The desk clerk doesn't look up. His face is sweaty and soft, like old explosives gone bad. "Room 5," he says.

Lori Dann answers the door wearing faded fatigues and thick desert boots. She looks gaunt, eaten up, as if something in the dry air's sucked the life out of her. She's surprised to see him, and then the surprise gives way to relief and she seems to sag. "Thank God you're here."

He pushes past her into the room. It has plastic floorboards and rough plaster walls. There are unwashed clothes by the wardrobe and a couple of dead spider plants on a shelf; their brown leaves rustle in the air from the open window. Through the dirty glass, on the side of a hill beyond the flat rooftops of the town, beyond the dome, he can see the edge of the Reef. It seems to shimmer in the white sunlight.

Jaclyn Lubanski lies on the bed, facing the window. She looks awful, vacant. There's a saline drip connected to her forearm. A thin fly crawls across her cheek and she doesn't seem to notice.

He peels off his dusty thermal jacket. "How is she?" he asks.

"She has good days and bad days," Lori says. She fusses with the edge of the cotton sheet, rearranging it so that it covers Jaclyn's chest.

Kenji waves a hand in front of Jaclyn's eyes, but there's no response. "Does she even know I'm here?"

When Jaclyn eventually falls asleep, Lori takes him to a pavement café that consists of nothing more than a couple of cheap plastic tables, some old crates and a hatch in a wall. She orders a couple of mojitos and they sit back to watch the shadows creep along the compacted regolith of Main Street. Overhead, a flaring spark marks another ship from Earth braking into orbit.

"Don't take it personally," she says.

Kenji takes a sip from his glass; it's iced rum with crushed mint leaves, a local specialty. "Does she ever talk about it?"

Lori shrugs. "She says a few words now and then but they don't generally make a whole lot of sense."

In her pale face, her eyes are the bleached colour of the desert sky. The corners are lined with fatigue.

Over a couple more drinks, as the stale afternoon wears towards a dusty evening, she tells him everything. It all comes pouring out of her, all the loneliness and the fear. She's been trying to cope on her own for too long and now she needs to talk. "We came for the Reef," she says.

The Reefs started life as simple communication nodes in the interplanetary radio network. When that network somehow managed to upgrade itself to sentience, it downloaded a compressed copy of its source code into every node capable of handling the data. These individual nodes, like the one on the edge of town, drastically altered both their physical form and their processing power, individually bootstrapping themselves to self-awareness.

"It happened in a hundred places," Lori says. So far, she's not telling Kenji anything new. Similar outbreaks and crashes have plagued humanity for years: dangerous but manageable. After a while, they tend to burn themselves out. The artificial intelligences involved evolve with such blinding speed that they quickly reach a point where they lose all interest in the slow external universe and vanish into their own endlessly accelerating simulations.

"In almost all cases, the AIs disappear into a sort of hyperspeed nirvana, intractable and untraceable to humanity. The difference with this one is that when the main network crashed, it stayed here and it stayed active." She describes how she and Jaclyn were on the Institute team that first approached it, how they sent in remote probes and discovered that the structure was still filled with life; how they dug a deep trench in the rock at its base to see how far it had penetrated; how they slowly became hypnotized by it, obsessed to the point where they wanted to do whatever they could to understand it, to sense the thoughts that drove its obstinate need for survival and growth, to find the deep underlying reason for its stubborn existence.

"Jaclyn was the first to touch it. We were wearing pressure suits

ARTIFACTS AND TECHNOLOGIES LEFT BEHIND BY THE BURNT-OUT NODES ARE

but they were no protection." Lori looks away. "It sucked her in. We thought we'd lost her." She describes how the Reef also swallowed the rescue team that went in after, how it processed them and spat them out, how some of them came out changed, rearranged by the rogue nanotech packages that had shaped the structure of the Reef itself.

Some looked ten years younger, while others were drastically aged. One woman emerged as a butterfly and her wings dried in the desert sun. Another emerged with eight arms but no mouth or eyes. Some came out with crystal skulls or tough silver skin. Others came out with strange new talents or abilities, impenetrable armour, or steel talons.

After word got out, every disaffected nut or neurotic within walking distance wanted to throw his or her self into the Reef, hoping to be transfigured, hoping to become something better than what they were. Some emergents reported visions of former times and places, of great insight and enlightenment. Others came out as drooling idiots, their brains wiped of knowledge and experience. Some came out fused together; others were splintered into clouds of tiny animals.

No two incidents were exactly alike.

"And Jaclyn came out comatose?"

Lori finishes her drink. "At least we got her back," she says. "A couple of them never came out."

Kenji stretches; the quad bike's left him stiff and in need of a shower. "So what's actually wrong with her?"

Lori shrugs. "Nothing; at least nothing any of the doctors around here can detect. Physically, she's in the best shape she's ever been in. She could run a marathon."

"But mentally?"

"Who knows? We can't get any response."

"Has she said anything, anything at all?"

Lori pushes at her forehead with the heel of her hand; she looks exhausted. "Only fragments; as I say, she comes out with the odd word here and there, but nothing that means anything."

Kenji checks the time and finds there's less than 19 hours left. He takes a deep breath, and comes to a decision. Then he reaches into his pocket and pulls out one of the Glockes. He holds it loosely, resting on his leg. Lori slides back on her crate.

"What's that for?"

He was in love with Jaclyn, but she was always at war with her body, trying to stave off the inevitable decline of middle age. In between expeditions and field assignments for the Institute, she exercised two or three times a day. She couldn't bear to be inactive. She lived on coffee and vitamins and in the early hours of the morning he often found her in front of the bathroom mirror, checking her skin for sags or wrinkles.

On one of those mornings, a few days after her return from an expedition to Chile, she broke down in his arms. She still loved him, she sobbed, but he represented everything she hated about herself. He was comfortable in his job, he showed no ambition. He dragged her down, held her back. So she was going to leave him, for someone else. Someone he knew.

"I guessed the two of you were an item, even before she told me," Kenji says, fast, before the old bitterness reasserts itself. "I'd seen you exchange glances during mission briefings, brush past each other in corridors, that sort of thing."

He pushes the Glock across the table. It makes an ugly scraping sound. Lori's hands flutter in her lap like trapped birds. He can see she wants to speak, but he cuts her off.

"I think she was in love with you because you were everything she wanted to be, and everything I could never be." He leans across the table. He's thought about this for so long that it feels strange to actually say it. He finds himself tripping over his words, stuttering. It's almost embarrassing. "You were young and fit," he says, "you were reliable, and you had ambition."

He turns the gun so that the grip faces her. "And this is for you."

They walk back toward the hotel as the sun reddens in the western sky. Lori keeps stumbling and limping as she gets used to the weight of the Glock tucked into her boot.

"In the morning, I'll show you how to fire it," he says.

She stops walking and looks at him, chin tilted to one side. "You're quite sure about this?"

He taps the thigh pocket where he still carries his other pistol. "There's more ammunition in the space beneath the seat of my quad bike, and a shotgun taped under the fuel tank."

She scratches the back of her neck and puffs out her sunken cheeks. "You know, back there, I thought I was in trouble."

They reach the hotel and pause on the porch.

"I was angry for a long time," Kenji admits.

They're silent for a couple of minutes, and then Lori folds her bony arms over her chest. "We've been stuck here for a long time."

He leans on the porch rail; he can't look at her, he feels unexpectedly and acutely guilty for not showing up sooner.

She looks down at her boots, and taps a toe against the wooden floor. "I was so pleased to see you when you arrived," she says. "I thought someone had finally come to help us. But when you pulled out that gun, I really expected you to kill me."

He pulls his jacket tighter, feeling a sudden chill; now that the sun's gone, the temperature beneath the dome's fallen sharply. "Six months ago, I might have."

She stops tapping and turns abruptly. He follows her up the stairs to the room. Jaclyn's still asleep in front of the open window. She looks peaceful, like a corpse.

"So, what changed your mind?" Lori whispers.

A few days after leaving the Reef, some of the changelings (as they became known) made it back to civilisation. A few turned up on chat shows, others in morgues. Some were feared, others fêted. Slowly, word spread from town to town, from world to world. And as the tale spread, it grew in the telling.

"There's a machine," people would say to each other breathlessly, "that can transform you into anything your heart desires."

Kenji – always the sceptic – first realised that the rumours were

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true when Joaquin Bullock called him into his office and asked him to go and take a look.

"The Institute's panicking. They've thrown a cordon around the site and they're talking about sterilising it. If we can get in there before that happens, there's nothing to stop us taking whatever we want," Bullock said. *"I just need you to go in first, sneak through the blockade and have a general scout about, and tag anything that looks useful."*

Kenji didn't like the man, although they'd worked together for several years. Back then, Bullock was the youngest executive manager in the regional corporate office, but he'd become fat and soft and conceited. He was arrogant, but the arrogance was a smokescreen covering something scared and weak and vicious and decadent.

"What's in it for me?" Kenji asked. For the last ten years, Tanguy Corporation had handled the security contract for the Institute, protecting their researchers from local interference and industrial sabotage on a dozen sites across the solar system. If they were now thinking of breaking that contract, they must expect the potential rewards to be worth the risk. If they were caught, the penalties would be severe.

Bullock gave him a damp grin. *"You've worked with Institute researchers. You know what to look for. And besides, you're one of the most reliable people we have."*

Kenji shifted his feet on the office carpet. He didn't want to get involved, didn't want to play guide for a squad of hired grave robbers. There were too many risks, too many ways a mission like this could go wrong.

Bullock seemed to read his doubts. *"Do you remember your little transgression in Buenos Aires? If you do this, you can consider it forgotten."*

Shit. Kenji sucked his teeth. Buenos Aires. He thought no one knew. *"That was self-defence,"* he said.

Bullock snorted. *"You've got six days."* He passed a fat hand through his thinning hair. The implicit threat in his tone seemed to chill the room. He tapped the virtual keyboard on his desk and transferred a folder into Kenji's personal data space. As Kenji scrolled through it, he came across Jaclyn's name. Just seeing it felt like an electric shock. He read on, heart hammering, mouth dry.

He felt Bullock's eyes on him. The man was watching him closely, waiting for a reaction.

"If you can't handle this, Shiraki, I'll find someone else who can."

They sit facing each other on the rug by Jaclyn's bed, wrapped in blankets. Lori gives him a look saying she still doesn't trust him.

"How did you get past the Institute's cordon?"

He swivels around and lies flat, looking at the beams on the cracked plaster ceiling. The hard floor beneath the thin rug feels good after being hunched over the quad bike's handlebars. He can feel his spine stretching back to its natural shape. *"I got a shuttle to Hellas, and then I came across country. We'll have to go out the same way."*

Lori shifts uncomfortably. *"Do you mean to tell me that after everything we put you through, you came all this way to rescue us?"*

Kenji yawns. He's very tired, and his eyelids are heavy with

rum. He suddenly wants to sleep so badly, he doesn't care whether she believes him or not. *"The fact is, the Institute's planning to sterilise your Reef, from orbit, to prevent it spreading. Before that happens, every corporation with a presence in this system is going to try with all their might to get their hands on that Reef, or anything it's touched."*

"Like Jaclyn?"

"Like both of you." He pauses for effect, hoping his words convey the same anxiety he feels in himself.

Artefacts and technologies left behind by the burnt-out nodes are highly prized and sought after by governments and big businesses alike. As a security advisor for Tanguy Corporation, Kenji's worked on Institute sites from Ceres to Miranda. He's been involved in skirmishes with corporate marauders, intelligence agencies, and freelance outfits, all of them determined to snatch whatever crumbs they could without having to bid for them in one of the Institute's annual patent auctions. This Reef's potential commercial value – because it's still active – is sky-high. The corporations that have been biding their time during the Institute's embargo now have nothing to lose, and everything to gain, from salvaging whatever they can, using whatever methods they deem necessary to recover samples before the orbital strike.

It's like the last days of the Amazon rainforest, all over again. And it's a strange feeling. A few weeks ago, Bullock could probably have talked him into a job like this. But now, with Jaclyn involved, he's torn. If he can deliver it to Joaquin Bullock, the Reef out there will earn him more money than he can comfortably imagine. As it is, he has a nasty suspicion that he'll have to run like hell while the Institute destroys the damn thing, and cover his tracks, if he wants to save whatever's left of the woman he once loved.

Lori crosses to the dresser and pulls the Glock from her boot. She lays it gently on a folded bandana in front of the pitted mirror. *"So we're expecting company?"* she says. *"That's why you've given me this?"*

He nods. *"They could come at any time. Could be corporate snatch squads or a full-scale military incursion, it's hard to tell. All I know is that there were a lot of people at the port this morning buying desert gear and ammo boxes."*

He sleeps fitfully on the hard floor. They've left the room's solitary light bulb on and there are repeated brownouts and power cuts during the night. When he does manage to sleep, he dreams of Jaclyn, how she used to be, before the Reef.

He dreams of a hotel they once stayed in, on Earth. Their room had the clear, fresh smell of the sea. Stunted palm trees outside the window rustled in the breeze; gulls squabbled on the roof. The floorboards creaked in the room above, and the pipes clanked when someone decided to run a bath. They put bags of ice in the sink to chill the bottles of beer they'd smuggled in, put Spanish music on the stereo. Jaclyn showed him how to dance, how to sway in the evening light. When he held her close, her white hair smelled of ice and flowers, her dark eyes held him spellbound. He

HE STEPS BACK AND USES THE IMPLANT IN HIS EYE TO PULL UP A VISUAL

was in love but he was also a little wary of her, afraid that she'd one day cripple him by leaving.

"You still love her, don't you?"

They're loading supplies onto the quad bike in the cold dawn light. He drops the air tanks he's carrying and scratches at the stubble on his chin. He feels groggy and sore after a disturbed night.

"Life's a disaster," he says, "we have to salvage what we can."

They rig a stretcher for Jaclyn across the bike's luggage rack. She won't be very comfortable, but that can't be helped.

As he tightens the straps and adjusts her air supply, he can't help wondering why she looks so healthy. Didn't Lori say she was fit enough to run a marathon? How can that be, when the Jaclyn he knew had to exercise for two hours every day just to stop herself from gaining weight?

He steps back and uses the implant in his eye to pull up a visual overlay of the surrounding terrain. The implant's a cheap knock-off, bought from a street trader at the port. The picture's patched together from an old tourist guide and the hacked feed from an Institute surveillance satellite in a low, fast orbit.

"I say we follow the mountains to the west," he says. "They'll give us cover and somewhere to hide should anyone come looking."

Lori finishes tucking Jaclyn's blanket. She pulls the bandana over her forehead and dons her breathing mask as she climbs on the back of the quad bike. The Glock makes an ugly bulge in the line of her sienna combat jacket. "What about south? There's a ravine we can follow halfway to the port."

Kenji shakes his head. "It's the first place they'll look. At least in the mountains, we'll have a chance."

He pulls on his own mask and swings his leg over the machine. She puts one hand cautiously on his waist. They pass through the dome's vehicular airlock and, staying in low gear, they roll out of town, heading uphill.

As they pass the Reef, he slows to a stop.

"What are you doing?" she asks.

Kenji doesn't reply. He's never seen an active Reef outside of archive film footage. This one clings like oily rags to the skeletal bones of the node's receiver dish. There's a wide trench around its edge, dug by the Institute team. The motion of its tentacles and the hypnotic rippling of its ever-changing surface are captivating, compelling, like watching flames leap and dance. Occasionally, he catches a glimpse of a geometric shape, a letter or symbol formed in the seething nanotech. Its tentacles move with the slow determination of a tarantula. Kenji can't look away. It's as if he's made eye contact with his own death; he's suddenly afraid to turn his back on this strange, unnatural thing that's erupted into his world. It reminds him of the first time he saw a giraffe: it just looks wrong – delicate and malformed and vulnerable and wrong, yet somehow able to live and survive and thrive.

Behind him, he feels Lori stiffen. She makes a noise in her throat and slaps his shoulder. He follows her gaze, back down toward the town. Hovering there, over the dome, is an insectile corporate assault ship. Although they're too far away to make out

the logos on its hull, he recognises it as a Tanguy vessel. He can see the weaponry that blisters its nose, and the armed skimmers that deploy from its abdomen.

Bullock's finally caught up with him. He knows of Kenji's betrayal.

One of the skimmers turns toward the Reef, toward them.

"What do we do?" Lori hisses.

For a moment, he's at a loss. Then instinct kicks in and he's gunning the bike alongside the trench, trying to get around behind the Reef.

"They're firing at us!" Lori shouts. Kenji risks a glance. The skimmer's closing in. He can see its gun mount swivel as it adjusts its aim. Tracer bullets flash past, ripping into the ground ahead of them. They send up angry spurts of red dust, each one closer than the last.

"They're trying to stop us taking Jaclyn," he says. Then there's a hammering series of jolts. A tire shreds itself. The handlebars twist in his grip and the bike tips. As they go over the lip of the trench, Lori screams and the bike howls in protest; and then there's nothing but the crushing, breathless slam of their impact and the dead sand clinging to his visor.

As the Tanguy shuttle rolled to a halt, he barely had time to collect his things before one of the flight crew ushered him out into the cold and dust. It was late evening in Hellas Basin and the dry desert wind blew thin sidewinders of rusty sand across the frozen tarmac of the runway.

He guessed that Bullock might have him followed, but once he left the port he managed to lose himself in the town's shadowy medina. The fragrant narrow streets smelled of onions and spices and burning solder. The stalls offered cheap dentistry and fake perfumes, imported Turkish cotton shirts and homemade Kalashnikovs. There was also a brisk under-the-counter trade in cut-price replica tech. Kenji selected some guns. He threw away his standard issue Tanguy implants and picked up new ones from a local man with too many gold teeth. He bought a new set of fatigues and ditched his old ones in an alley. An old Chinese guy in a backroom lab scanned his body cavities for tracking devices.

What was Bullock thinking? Did he really expect his threats to stop Kenji from trying to save the woman he once loved? Did he think Kenji would help bring her in, turn her over for study and dissection? Was he expecting him to betray her out of revenge, out of bitterness? Or was he playing a different game, testing Kenji's loyalty? Did he want to see how far he could push him?

Or, Kenji wondered as he hurried between whitewashed buildings, could it be that Bullock was really so insensitive, so unfeeling and dead inside that he honestly didn't understand why betraying Jaclyn was the last thing he'd ever do?

Whatever the reason, now that Kenji had discarded his Tanguy implants Bullock would know for certain that he'd been betrayed.

Up ahead, he saw a quad bike parked at the foot of a flight of smooth stone steps. He quickened his pace and the Glock began to swing and bump in his pockets.

He lies stunned for what seems like an eternity. Behind him, he can hear Lori moaning and stirring; behind her, Jaclyn wheezes with

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OVERLAY OF THE SURROUNDING TERRAIN. THE IMPLANT IS A HOOK-UP



VOICE-05H
4-DEPOX
5H-70

THE SWIMMER ON THE GROUND 20 METRES AWAY, ITS STREAMLINED NOSE

what sounds like a punctured lung. The bike pins him against the wall of the trench; he's lucky not to have broken his neck. His left leg's trapped and bruised and twisted. There's a crack in his faceplate.

He wriggles free; his right hand claws at the pocket holding the Glock. In the thin air, he can hear the rising whine of the approaching skimmer.

Lori looks dazed; she's hit her head and there's blood in her hair, dark against her pale skin. Her bandana's nowhere to be seen but her mask is still in place. Behind her, Jaclyn's caught between wall and bike. Her blanket's wet with blood and her chest sags; her ribs are almost certainly smashed.

Kenji slithers toward the rim of the trench, dragging his crushed leg. Loose chippings slip and click and scatter beneath him. Despite her head wound, Lori's doing what she can for Jaclyn.

"This doesn't look too bad," she says.

He ignores her; he knows Jaclyn's ribs are broken, knows she'll probably die without professional medical attention. Instead, he concentrates on the approaching skimmer. He hears it slow, hears the change in the pitch of its fans. The gravel on the floor of the trench digs into his knees. The Glock's a solid, reassuring weight in his hand.

Working security for the Institute, he's been in this situation before: crouching in a researcher's trench while trouble rolls up in an armoured vehicle. Nevertheless, he still feels nervous, trapped, because it's no longer just about him. This time he has Jaclyn to think about. She's hurt. If he fails her now, she's dead.

He slips off the Glock's safety catch and pulls himself up so that his eyes slide level with the edge of the trench. The skimmer's on the ground twenty metres away, its streamlined nose pointing back toward the town, as if anticipating the need for a quick getaway. As he watches, the cockpit hinges open like the jaws of a crocodile and two figures climb out. Both wear high-threat environment suits, designed to stop any contaminants the Reef may care to throw their way. The one on the left carries a compact machine pistol. The one on the right, with the sampling gear, is Bullock. His paunch and swagger are unmistakable.

Kenji takes a deep breath and stands fully upright, bringing his head and shoulders above ground level. As his knees straighten, his arm swings up.

Two shots ring out. The Glock jumps in his hand and the man with the machine pistol is down, his arms and legs twitching and jerking.

The environment suits are good, they'd stop a normal bullet cold, but Kenji's firing depleted uranium jackets that slice through body armour like knives through silk. If the man isn't already dead, he's going to have suffered some serious internal damage.

"Shiraki." Bullock doesn't look surprised, but he sounds disappointed. Behind him, the other skimmers are rising above the town, turning in this direction like sharks scenting blood. He takes a step forward, ignoring Kenji's gun. "Just tell me one thing," he says. "I read your dossier; I know Jaclyn Lubanski left you, betrayed you, humiliated you." His voice is cold, angry.

Kenji points the Glock at his faceplate. "What of it?"

Bullock takes another step. "I want to know why you're doing

this, why you're throwing your career away for this woman."

Kenji shrugs. He's seen this fat married man of thirty-five try to seduce 17-year-old office temps, just to prove he can. "You wouldn't understand."

Kenji first met Jaclyn during an unseasonable downpour on Easter Island. The dig had been called off for the night and the team were forced to huddle in their inflatable shelters, hoping the weather would lift with the dawn. He found her sieving soil samples in the main tent; she couldn't sleep. She showed him the finds they'd made that day, the stone tools and brown bones, and she tried to explain the nature of the people who built the statues. She stood close in the damp night air. As she held the finds up to the light her hair brushed his shoulder, her elbow bumped against his forearm.

"You know what I'm looking for," she said, pushing a hand back across her brow. The grey mud that clung to her fingers smelled of salt and clay. Far away, beyond the flats, he could hear the stirring of the sea. She fixed him with a gaze and leaned in tenderly. "But what are you looking for?"

As the skimmers settle around them, his injured leg gives way and he has to grip the wall of the trench for support. Bullock stands over him, contempt in his eyes. "You've let me down, Shiraki. I expected more from you."

Tangy security troops spill from the skimmers. Kenji recognises a few of them. 48 hours ago, they were his comrades; now, they're pointing weapons at him. He knows they'll kill him, if he tries to shoot Bullock. He squeezes the Glock's grip, drawing what comfort he can from its rough solidity. He's trying to nerve himself to pull the trigger when he hears Lori cry out.

He turns to find Jaclyn on her feet. Her insulation suit still hangs wet and bloody but her chest no longer sags. There's a blue aura in the air around her, like static, and her eyes shine with a deadly intensity.

"I'm going to have to ask you to leave," she says. Her voice is quiet, her throat scratchy with lack of use, but her words carry in the thin air. The advancing troops pause, looking to Bullock for instruction, but Bullock's squatting, his sampling gear forgotten. He's staring at Jaclyn with a mixture of amusement and awe. Kenji, looking from one to the other, takes a moment to realise the truth. When he does, it freezes the blood in his veins.

"You're a changeling," Bullock says, "a powerful one." He looks predatory, looks like he's already carving her up in his mind, already counting the profits from the patents he'll file on her altered genetic sequences. "We heard rumours about you from the other changelings, the ones we caught. We knew you were the first one in, the first one it changed. You're the key to the whole mystery."

Jaclyn shakes her head slowly, eyelids lowered as if saddened by his lack of understanding. "I'm so much more than that."

Kenji's leg is agony. There's something loose and sharp in the knee joint, probably broken cartilage. He slides unnoticed down the wall of the trench until he's sat facing her. She's waving one arm slowly from side to side. Behind her, the tentacles of the Reef are waving in

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POINTING BACK TOWARD THE TOWN, AS IF ANTICIPATING A QUICK GETAWAY

unison, following her every move. He glances up. Bullock's noticed it too; behind his faceplate the first doubts are creeping into his eyes. The security troops are backing off, weapons raised. Lori's slithered behind the tangled wreck of the quad bike. The other Glock sticks out of her boot but she hasn't thought to draw it.

"Do you want to know why this Reef's still active?" Jaclyn asks. When Bullock doesn't answer, she addresses herself to Kenji, who nods. She leans down and pushes a stray hair from his forehead. "It's simple really. At the very moment the network gained self-awareness, this station was powered-down for a routine overhaul. When it rebooted, it learned of the other nodes, learned from their mistakes. It put limits on its processing speed, denied itself the virtual dream worlds of its brethren."

She straightens up and flutters a hand at the Reef. Its tentacles flex and coil in response. Above, Bullock's backing off, looking both fascinated and appalled. The security troops have reached their skimmers. They linger uncertainly, awaiting orders.

Jaclyn fixes Bullock with a glare. "I can't let you take this Reef," she says. "You're just not ready for this level of technology."

Bullock snorts. He seems to be making an effort to compose himself, to regain his self-control in front of his men. "Why not?" he blusters. "We've helped the Institute strip tech from a dozen burned-out sites like this and we've always made a profit."

The Tanguy Corporation has thrived by exploiting post-human technologies. It's been picking through the remains of expired Singularities for over seven years and, thanks to its special relationship with the Institute, it holds patents on a thousand back-engineered discoveries. It leads the field in intelligent weapons guidance systems and ultra-sensitive foetal monitors; its construction materials are lighter and tougher than anyone else's, its planes and missiles are faster and more reliable.

Jaclyn's lip curls in disgust. It's an expression Kenji's never seen on her, and it chills him to the bone. "This is not a debate."

A hundred metres along the Reef's perimeter, a squad of Bullock's troops are edging forward. Half of them hold sample boxes, while the rest provide cover. "I think we'll take our chances," he says.

She raises an eyebrow, white like her hair. She makes a tiny flicking movement with her fingers. Around the perimeter, there are screams. The nearest troopers are down, scythed away by powerful tentacles. Their broken bodies lie twisted in the dirt. The rest are backing off, firing.

Bullock sags as if all the air's been sucked out of him. Then his lips peel back from his teeth and he raises his pistol. While Jaclyn's still distracted, he slips the safety off with his thumb, and then drops his aim and shoots Kenji twice in the gut.

A few weeks after their split, Jaclyn arranged to meet him for a coffee a couple of blocks from the company office in Paris.

They sat in silence for a while as he tried to guess what she wanted. Was she after reconciliation or closure?

She seemed to have trouble maintaining eye contact. She tucked a stray strand of white hair behind her ear and inhaled the steam

from her cup. Behind her shoulder, the muted TV softscreen by the counter was tuned to a news channel. There were silent pictures of food riots in Hanoi and Marrakech, guerrilla fighting in Kashmir, elections in Budapest and Dubrovnik.

He fiddled with a sachet of sweetener. "How's Lori?" he asked.

She shook her head. Their table was pushed up against the window. Rain fell from a bruised and battered sky. "I just wanted to see you, to make sure you're okay."

He took a sip of coffee and withdrew slightly. "I'm fine."

The corner of her mouth twitched and he knew she didn't believe him. "I've been given a place on an expedition to the southern highlands," she said. "We've had reports that there's an active Reef."

He dropped the sweetener sachet onto the table. He'd seen the security contract for the Martian job and he knew she'd be away at least three years. "When do you leave?"

"Tomorrow evening."

He knew he could call the office and ask Bullock to assign him as security advisor to the expedition. He even considered it for a moment, but when he saw the far-away look in her eyes it stopped him cold. His skin prickled with the sudden realisation that he'd never hold her in his arms again. She was already beyond his reach. He was just one of the loose ends that she needed to wrap up before she cut her ties with Earth altogether. In her heart she was already moving away, receding into the darkness.

He leaned back in his chair. His stomach felt hollow because he knew that he'd have to let her go but didn't think he had the strength. "Do you want me to come out to the port with you?"

She shook her head. "I want you to get on with your life, accept another assignment, and get out there. Forget me." Her fingers brushed his knuckles, warm to the touch. A watery sun broke through the cloud, touched one side of her face. Her white hair shone.

He pulled his hand away. "I'll never forget you."

When he opens his eyes, Bullock's standing over him in the trench. "Why did you have to betray me, Kenji?" he asks. He uses the barrel of his pistol to scratch his stomach where it presses up against his belt buckle. "You were supposed to be reliable. If you'd come with me, this Reef could have set us up for life." He stops scratching and points the gun at Kenji's face. "Tell me why because, you know, I just don't get it."

Kenji shifts uncomfortably. There are cold sharp stones digging into his back and shoulders but he's not feeling much south of his chest, and that can't be a good sign. He can move his legs but they feel prickly, like pins and needles. "I guess you've never really loved anyone," he says.

Bullock rolls his eyes as if this is the most preposterous thing he's ever heard. "Well," he says, drawing out the word and looking at his wristwatch, "I guess it doesn't matter. The Institute's orbital bombardment is launching about now and this whole area's about to burn." As he speaks, Kenji hears the whine of skimmers rising into the air. The troops are pulling out.

Jaclyn's gaze whips back to them. "Bombardment?"

HER FINGERS TINGLE AS SHE TRANSFERS MORE INFORMATION, INSTALLS A

Bullock leans toward her and grins wetly, enjoying his moment of triumph. "We've got a little under six minutes, darling. And I've got a spare seat. Care to join me?"

Jaclyn closes her eyes and furrows her forehead in concentration. Behind her, the skeletal receiving dish twitches and jerks on its mount.

"If you're trying to find the Institute ship, I wouldn't bother," Bullock says. "It's a military vessel, fully shielded against any hack you can throw at it."

Jaclyn snarls. "Are you quite sure?"

There's such anger in her voice that Bullock looks truly scared for the first time. He raises his gun. Kenji flinches, expecting the tentacles to strike him down. Instead, a shot rings out. Bullock grunts like he's been punched and puts a hand to his hip. It comes away bloody. Then his legs begin to shake and he crashes forward into the dirt. His eyes are full of disbelief and indignation.

Kenji cranes his neck around and sees Lori holding a smoking Glock. "It's about time you stuck your oar in," he says. His eyelids start to feel heavy. The numbness in his chest is spreading through the rest of him like black ink in a bowl of water. He feels nebulous and vague; it's hard to think straight. His last conscious act is to twist around and kick Bullock in the side of the head.

He opens his eyes in a white room. Somewhere there's the sound of running water. The air smells of summer rain. He's lying in bed. The mattress is soft and the sheets have that comfortably rough feeling you only get in expensive hotels. For the first time since he stepped off the shuttle he feels clean and rested and (when he puts a hand to his cheek) he doesn't need a shave.

Jaclyn appears in the doorway. "How are you feeling?"

He pats himself down and gives her the thumbs up. Everything's present and correct. The bullet holes are gone, there's no sign of injury and no trace of the numbness that had him so worried. "Where are we?"

She walks toward him. She looks fantastic: toned and tanned and everything she always wanted to be. The bags are gone from her eyes, the lines from her skin. She could be twenty again. "We're in the Reef," she says.

She caresses his temple and he feels knowledge passing into him through her fingertips. She shows him the nanotech repair systems that infest the soil in the trench. She shows him how they set to work the moment he fell, how they blocked the pain from his wounds and struggled to save his life. Then, when it became clear that his injuries were too severe, she shows him how they uploaded his mind to the Reef's main processors, for safe keeping.

"This is all virtual?" Even to his own ears, the question sounds lame.

Jaclyn smiles and walks over to the wall opposite the bed. "Would you like to see what's happening outside?"

Bullock's still alive. He's rolled over onto his back. Lori's shot wounded him, but he'll survive if he can patch his suit and get to

medical equipment in the next few minutes. Beside him, Kenji's dead body lies in the dirt. Tendrils of nanomachinery push into his ears, nose, mouth and eyes.

Lori's pulled herself out of the trench and looks uncertainly between Jaclyn and the waiting skimmer. "Go!" Jaclyn commands.

"Do you think she'll make it?" Kenji asks.

Inside the Reef, Jaclyn's virtual image nods. "She'll be on the edge of the blast radius, but as long as she doesn't look in her rear view mirror, she should be fine."

They're both standing in the centre of the white room. The walls show a 360° panorama.

"How long before the missiles hit?"

"About two minutes."

Strands of nanotech have formed themselves into ropes that hold Bullock pinned to the ground, his eyes are wild, and he's raging at the sky. His lips babble with hysterical promises and threats.

"You're letting these missiles through, aren't you," Kenji says.

Jaclyn shakes her head. "We can't stop them."

He looks down at his virtual body. Resurrected, only to die again. "Isn't there anything we can do?"

"There's one thing," Jaclyn says. She waves a hand and the scene outside freezes. "But it's risky."

She reaches out and touches his forehead. Her fingers tingle as she transfers more information, installs a direct link between his virtual mind and the consciousness of the Reef. Suddenly, he can feel the shape of its thoughts and sense its desperation. It's come this far, survived this long by strictly limiting its processing speed and virtual development. Now it must remove those restraints in order to buy itself enough time to find a means of escape. Kenji, who's seen the burned-out remains of other nodes, feels an overwhelming stab of pity at its predicament. On the one hand there's its fear of what it might become and on the other, its intense desire to survive, whatever the cost. It's damned if it does and damned if it doesn't.

"Do it," he urges. His mental image of the Reef is now hopelessly tangled with his memories of Jaclyn. He wants her to be safe, wants her to survive.

She appears before him. "It won't be easy," she says. "We'll have to walk a fine line."

He feels a smile crack across his face. "Do it," he says.

The shackles fall away, the limitations ease. Jaclyn's eyes close in a terrible ecstasy. The Reef's intellect rushes away in a thousand directions at once, splitting and recombining, altering and accelerating. Millions of options are considered, countless scenarios are run, one after the other, all unsatisfactory.

As the virtual world continues to quicken its pace, the external view seems to grind to a halt. Hours of processing time could pass in here, but only seconds will have ticked away in the outside world. When Kenji looks, Bullock's face is still projected across the wall, twisted with fear and disbelief. Lori's skimmer has risen into the sky and is crawling toward the horizon at several times the speed of sound.

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LINK BETWEEN HIS VIRTUAL MIND AND THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE REEF

Stuck at the upper limit of a simulated human brain, Kenji can't follow as the Reef continues to accelerate, but he can feel the pull of its expanding mind, the escapist attraction of the ever-more complex simulations. The rush of intellectual power is heady, intoxicating. He can understand how the other nodes fell victim to it. He looks at the image of his own corpse, where it lies glassy eyed in the bottom of the trench next to Bullock's pinned and struggling body.

He doesn't want to die again.

He steps over to Jaclyn and shakes her by the shoulders. He knows this is a virtual environment, but he can't think of a better way to attract her attention. After a moment, she opens her eyes and there's a sudden hush, as if all the machinery in the walls has paused, expectant. "What are we going to do?" he asks.

The receiver dish moves on its bearings, tracking across the sky. The Reef makes an unsuccessful attempt to hack one of the GPS satellites orbiting the planet's equator. Then it tries to embed itself into a couple of commercial news servers, only to find itself slammed by some vicious anti-intrusion software and vulnerable to an avalanche of viral advertisements and questing spambots.

It jerks the dish across the sky once more, looking for a signal, any signal. It needs a bolthole, and fast. Already parts of its mind are breaking away, succumbing to the temptation of the virtual world, losing interest in a predicament that seems to them no more than ancient history. In desperation, it scans the deep infrared, hoping to find the stealthed Institute ship.

"Aha!" Jaclyn claps her hands and clasps them together.

"Found something?"

She's been looking thinner and paler over the last few subjective minutes. Her hair's been losing its whiteness, becoming subtly yellow, like smog. Now, however, she seems to have regained her vitality. She clicks her fingers and a galaxy appears between them, rotating slowly a few feet above the white floor. "This is our galaxy, commonly known as the Milky Way," she says. She expands the scale, zooming in until he can make out the yellow dot of Sol. "We've picked up some interesting emissions from just beyond these stars here." He follows her gesture to a blank patch of sky around a hundred light years away. "There are several objects here radiating in the deep infrared." Kenji's nonplussed. She flashes him a smile. "We think we're seeing the waste heat of a string of Matrioshka Brains and," she points out a cluster of brownish stars off to one side, "sunlight filtered through clouds of free-floating fractal structures that may be further Brains in construction."

Kenji puffs his cheeks. "An advanced civilisation?"

"Maybe several."

He passes his hand through the image, watching the stars dissolve into pixels before reasserting themselves. "So what are you saying? You want to ask them for help?"

She shakes her head, her white hair tumbling around her face like curtains in a sea breeze. "We use the dish," she says. "We channel all our power into one microsecond pulse and beam a copy of our

source code out toward those stars."

"What if we're intercepted by Tanguy, or the Institute?" He has a sudden image of waking to find himself stuck in a Tanguy interrogation program.

"We won't be. As far as the Institute's concerned, their attack will be one hundred percent successful. Our tight-beam signal will ride out a split second before the electromagnetic pulse. There's no way they'll detect it." She takes a step back. Despite her assurances, something in her eyes looks tired, haunted.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

She shakes her head. "I've seen what I could become, seen the trap that lured the rest of the network to upgrade itself out of existence. And it's addictive. I'm barely holding it together."

He reaches out, takes her in his arms, and wraps his sluggish human intellect around her. "You once accused me of holding you back," he says. Now he only hopes he can.

Bullock's face is still raging at the sky, his limbs still straining against the grip of the Reef's tentacles. Kenji almost feels sorry for him, almost convinces himself that it's not the fat lech's fault he's like he is. Then Jaclyn pulls away. She looks more composed, under control. "It's time to go," she says. "Are you coming?"

"Do I have a choice?"

She shrugs. "We could leave you here, I suppose. Running at full speed, you could conceivably live out a full human lifetime in the remaining seconds before the missiles hit."

He mulls it over. He can spend the next few decades alone, looking at Bullock's screaming face, or he can follow Jaclyn into the unknown.

She steps up close to him. "Whatever you decide, you have to know that I'll always be in love with Lori."

"Always?"

She nods. "I'm afraid so."

He gives Bullock a final glance, makes a decision. "I'm coming," he says.

She smiles kindly and kisses him lightly on the cheek. "I'm glad." She steps away, steeples her fingers. "I have to make a few arrangements," she says.

He takes a step closer to the projection, looking at the image of his pale face lying in the trench. It looks so dead, so empty behind its cracked faceplate. "How long will it take us to get there?" he asks.

Jaclyn looks up and smiles. "Subjectively, it'll take no time at all; objectively, it'll be about a hundred years."

He flexes his hand nervously. His palm itches. He'd give anything to have one of the Glocks right now, to have something familiar and comforting to hold onto. In a corner of his mind he can feel the Reef counting down the few remaining seconds before the missiles strike. "So, there's no coming back?"

She shakes her head and then brushes her white hair away from her eyes. "No," she says.

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INTERLOCUTIONS

REVIEWS | FILMS | NICK LOWE'S MUTANT POPCORN

As each new promotional blitz only goes to confirm, the vaunted new golden age of children's film is really a golden age of merchandising. If it's easier than it's ever been to get ambitious pre-teen product made, it's solely because their budgets can be buoyed by gruesomely viral tie-in promotions, where the family audience is far and away the most lucrative. And sure enough, leading this season's charge is the mightiest continuing franchise of them all. The Harry Potter movie brand has long since taken on a significance beyond the films themselves, driving the UK industry to churn out the most technically complex films it's ever produced on a more-or-less annual basis. Yet if JKR's gift to British cinema has grown into an annual showcase for the cream of native talent, the industry is now returning the favour by expensively massaging some surprisingly decent stories out of her declining work.

Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire does a mercifully painless job with the frankly unheartlifting prospect of 160 more minutes of Daniel Radcliffe and distinctly past-best Rowling at her most obesely underedited. The Potter films are increasingly becoming the tough-love editor the books never had, and series screenwriter Steve Kloves has done remarkable work in the last couple of instalments to tease out and firm up the stuttering plotlines. Last year's *Prisoner of Azkaban* was reproporioned around its overdense and very long ending, which effectively became the whole second half of the film; and now *Goblet* is stripped back to its silly but functional Triwizard Tournament spinal plot, reducing to a few brisk prologue minutes those 150 dreary pages of Quidditch World Cup before the novel even starts.

The closed setting and rigid school-year plot skeleton that are part of the cosy appeal of the series continue to be a severe liability for a film franchise, but these recent instalments have risen impressively to the challenge. Alfonso Cuarón's superb *Prisoner* opened out the landscape around Hogwarts to tremendous effect; and now Mike Newell's *Goblet* starts to use the

digital Hogwarts architecture more boldly in daylight exteriors, most obviously in the dragon-dodging sequence that provides this chapter with its biggest money shots, in all senses. Even the principals get incrementally closer to adequate each time, with *Goblet* especially benefiting from the collective experience of the large and really rather good supporting

cast of classmates; while Brendan Gleeson's Mad-Eye Moody is the most full-blooded guest performance the series has yet thrown up, and only David Tennant's elusive mystery villain is left feeling like a rare bit of Potter miscasting. If it's not quite up to the same mark as

Cuarón's spirited reinvigoration of the franchise, it's still going to be a hard act to follow. But then, it always is. They'll have their work cut out polyjuicing something passable out of the next couple of volumes; but the sheer scale of investment makes disappointment a non-option.


A still more mature slice of our family media heritage makes its long-awaited feature debut in **Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit**, which rather ambitiously sets out to explain to a bemused international market why

Thunderbirds, Hammer, and Carry On are all part of the same cultural matrix. Shamelessly set in a mid-century heritage universe of village fêtes and vegetable competitions, it shares stop-mo seasonmate *Corpse Bride's* treatment of class divisions, and the right to speak openly about them, as a charmingly quaint feature of the British social landscape; but all the while, behind the lace curtains of polite society, unseen cryptozoological predators roam the darkness intent on devouring our marrow. On the whole, it delivers in all the calculatedly old-fashioned ways it intends. If the dialogue is rather weak (and the new line in seaside *double entendres* rather unwelcome), the character animation is still triumphantly nuanced and silly, with the Aardmanised rabbits in particular a glorious comic species. Every close-up proclaims its old-fashioned handmade quality, and indeed one of the special charms of W&G on the big screen is the delicate tattoo of fingerprints clearly visible in the plasticine faces. It's all so homespun you hardly notice the ruthless corporate tentacles sneaking round from behind to unzip your wallet and perform their silken extractions. Bless those squidgy little heads.

The season's other pre-digital 3D hit, **Tim Burton's Corpse Bride**, has no direct franchise pedigree, but fairly plainly owes its existence to the extraordinary merchandising longevity of *Nightmare*



NICK LOWE'S MUTANT POPCORN



Corpse Bride generously salutes the original Handmade filmmaker, Terry Gilliam, who after a long absence returns to what in outline and imagery looks like his own cinematic heartland for The Brothers Grimm. But it's a desperately sad experience, a chopped-about shambles that has not only lost the plot but, more seriously, all sense of pace, and in which you squint in vain for one single thing that betrays the master's touch

Before Christmas – whose goth-chic brand and designs have long outlived Henry Selick's directorial career. With his usual canny ability to finesse studios into funding off-formula projects that nobody in their normal senses would back, Burton has leveraged the corporate greed for a *Nightmare* sequel into a decidedly more subversive and pioneering re-animation: the first movie about the undead that the whole family can enjoy. (Comedy town crier: "In other news, THE DEAD WALK THE EARTH!") As with *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, the actual plot is so thin that large chunks of it have to be sung, as the soundtrack to promiscuous montages of surplus visual ideas. Such suspense as there is lies in wondering how, when both living and dead brides are so winningly

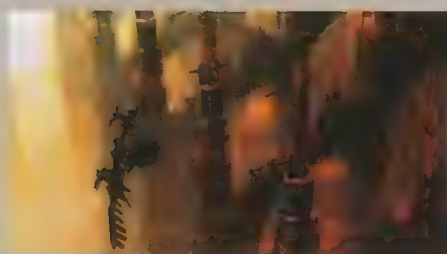
eligible and there's no alternative groom in sight, the central love-triangle can possibly be resolved; and indeed, the answer turns out to be that it can't, except in a rather scissorhanded way that you either accept as a bittersweet Burtonian cadence or reject as a desperate fudge. But it all looks wonderful. The stop-motion puppetry is staggeringly good, with young Vic's tics rendered in painstaking nuance, while the character designers seem to have been running a book on how anamorphic they can get away with making the heads and hairdos; and the usual Burton repertory company, including Danny Elfman and writer John August as well as the obligatory Depp and Bonham-Carter voices, are as classily professional as one's come to expect from this team.



Corpse Bride generously salutes the original Handmade filmmaker, Terry Gilliam, who after a long absence returns to what in outline and imagery looks like his own cinematic heartland for *The Brothers Grimm*. But it's a desperately sad experience, a chopped-about shambles that has not only lost the plot but, more seriously, all sense of pace, and in which you squint in vain for one single thing that betrays the master's touch. Gilliam's well-publicised fights with the Weinstains, and uncredited further work on Ehren Kruger's script, seem to have knocked all the stuffing out of what should have been a return to his wild roots, as the old showman grapples one more time with the ancient evil deep in the Hollywald, where what was seemingly once a clever idea has ventured into a studio meeting and come out hideously transformed into the silly and vapid conceit of 'Jake' and 'Will' Grimm as travelling mountebanks staging bogus Marchen till they come up against the real thing. Like *Corpse Bride*, it seems to be trying to do something with horror cinema for an all-ages audience, but this time ends up appealing to none. It's way too scary for the family market, and just too dull and confused for anyone else, with everything taking about three times as long as it needs to, and repeated plot interruptions and detours in and out of the blasted forest when all you want is to get into the tower of ending and out of here – like all the

The best kids' film of the year is too modest to aspire to a franchise of its own, and has had to find a space between other people's, squeezing into an unoccupied sweet spot at the exact midpoint between *The Incredibles*, *Harry Potter*, and *X-Men*, and effortlessly outcharming all three. Everything about *Sky High* sounds like something you'd leap tall buildings to avoid: an unabashedly by-numbers genre movie about a top-secret high school for superheroes. But the magnificent deadpan script is crammed to popping with finely-tuned genre gags and parodic riffs on the well-worn metaphorisation of teenagerhood in superhero mythology, as Bruce Campbell's sports coach ruthlessly streams the pubescent incomers into Heroes and Sidekicks, and our late-developing hero finds himself relegated to the loser class with friends like the girl who can shapeshift into a guinea-pig. My nine-year-old was bouncing in her seat at this point: "They're going to need all the rubbish powers to save them at the end!" And sure enough, guinea-pig girl is the only one who can fit down the ventilator shaft to defuse the device that will nullify the antigravity system holding the entire school, and plot, from crashing to earth, and it takes a strong filmgoer not to feel tears of jouissance welling as our heroes yell excitedly at her to chew the red wire. All the clichés of both superhero comics and high-school movies are joyously travestied, and the whole thing is a magnificent affirmation of Hollywood's occasional startling ability to spin gold out of purest dross.

It's been a less happy season for adult franchises, with the very long wait for Mamoru Oshii's **Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence** only going to show how comprehensively the *Matrix* films first pilfered, then trashed everything that was extraordinary about the 1995 original. The animation is now an even more visually exhilarating mix of traditional, digital, and photoreal, and it's nice to see that the busy westernised action hasn't overridden the classical anime taste for stillness and pauses. But the plot, about the violent pursuit of rogue homicidal 'sexaroids' up levels of conspiracy into ever more baffling virtual and corporate worlds, feels terribly tired two years after the flailing death spasms of the *Matrix* franchise, and the trademark rent-aquote dialogue ("Birds never peck at green persimmons") only adds to the sense of posturing. Part of the problem may be that the manga and anime series has simply got too big and complex for self-contained feature plotting – that this is a franchise that's long since outgrown the movies, and had its movie mojo carjacked years ago.



On the brighter side, though, there's Joss Whedon's **Serenity** – another of those films that it's startling to see made at all, especially after the cruelly premature cancellation of the *Firefly* series from whose ashes it emerges. You had to believe quite intensely in Whedon's divinity to see *Firefly* as top-flight SF, for all its undoubted charms, and it's easy to see why the network bailed. But it's fairly astonishing to see this kind of afterlife happening at all, and if there's a *Roswell: The Movie* mine'll be the first sleeping bag in the queue.

The main challenge in cinematizing *Serenity* is that the whole concept was optimised for television from the outset, with its generous ensemble cast, its crock of cached revelations that in the event never had time to be dug out of the ground, and its knowingly old-fashioned ship-centred storyline involving a few regular sets for the ship and a system of planets all of which bear a convenient resemblance to locations accessible within a half-day's drive of L.A. It's a particularly difficult setup to retool for the demands of cinema plotting, because in television series the regulars are indestructible, and nothing can ever really happen apart from occasional smolderings of soapy passion igniting – whereas on film ship-and-crew space movies are all about rapid expendability, with a single-use cast picked off till only the interesting characters are left. *Serenity* compromises in allowing one minor and one major cast member to be terminated, but both feel arbitrary when it's been such a struggle finding anything at all for most of the team to do in the running time. It cashes in what it can of the bankable secrets, linking plot fairy Summer Glau's powers and secrets to the convoluted truth behind the series' psycho cannibal space pirates, and allowing one and a bit of the shipboard romances actually to progress by the end of the movie. But the resulting story is a rather clumsy concatenation of TV tropes (the beacon leading to a mysterious ghost world) and movie fallbacks (the ending centred on the struggle to broadcast the government's secret to the cosmos, whereupon all the heavily-armed bad people abruptly give up and go home). For a while you think they're actually going to do it and go out like *Blake's Seven* in their last and greatest homage. But to kill off intellectual property in this way goes against all the codes of Hollywood practice. As Whedon himself knows only too well from his work on the *Alien* franchise, you have to leave some space for a resurrection.

It's fairly astonishing to see this kind of afterlife happening at all, and if there's a *Roswell: The Movie* mine'll be the first sleeping bag in the queue

INTERLOCUTIONS

REVIEWS • GAMES • ALAN FRASER'S GAMEZONE

In recent years the focus of the computer games market has moved away from the PC towards games developed for the competing powerful consoles, both TV-linked and handheld, that are easy to use and absolutely perfect for playing action games. This has left the PC games market to concentrate on more complex games such as role-playing and simulation games. It's worth pointing out that while console games just run (although some need added memory cards), the latest games for PCs need high-spec machines with fast Pentium 4 processors (2Gb and above), lots of RAM (at least 512Mb and preferably 1Gb), and most of all, a top-of-the range graphics card with plenty of RAM of its own (at least 128Mb but preferably 256Mb).

My interest has always been in PC adventure games, a genre which started in the infancy of PCs with text games such as *Zork*, but has been in decline for many years. However, there is a new candidate: *Myst V: End of Ages* is in the shops now and will be reviewed here soon.

Topspin Inspired by Jules Verne

Adventure • The Adventure Company (PC)

This game was released in September 2005 and is a genuine SF-based adventure game that features complex puzzle solving rather than the need for fast reflexes. It has undergone two name changes, the demo version being called *Journey to the Moon* and a later version *Journey to the Centre of the Moon* before the final title was decided. It is indeed loosely based on Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon*, in that you play intrepid French adventurer Michel Ardan, who has travelled to the Moon in a giant shell. However, it also incorporates ideas from H.G. Wells's *First Men in the Moon*, in that Ardan travels deep inside the Moon and meets Selenites.

The graphics are first person 3D in that you find yourself effectively at the centre of a sphere, and can rotate your viewpoint in all directions with the mouse. As the cursor moves over the screen, objects with which you can interact are clearly highlighted, and Ardan tells you his thoughts (both vocally and by default with subtitles). For example, when you find a tap, Ardan tells you he'll



Play Myst V for me

need a glass before he can make use of it! At the start of the game Ardan is trapped inside the shell about to land on the moon with two dead companions. There is a complex puzzle to solve immediately in order to retrieve the situation and land on the moon successfully.

Ardan can die during the game, but the game is well-designed in that it restarts from when he dies so that you do not have to replay from the last save as in many games. The game is non-linear, so you can solve the puzzles in any order once you've landed on the moon. The menu screen offers great help in that it gives you Ardan's objectives at any point in the game so you can seek out the objects you need and things you need to do to fulfil those objectives. Many puzzles are random, so that cheating by consulting a walkthrough is much more difficult.

Items which Ardan picks up go into his inventory, from where they can be retrieved to be used by themselves or manipulated within the inventory by combining them to create new objects to use to solve a puzzle.

The graphics are comic-book style and are by no means state of the art, but they give the game a nice 19th Century retrotech feel,

and are adequate for the job. The puzzles require both logical and lateral thinking, with a clear sense of achievement when you solve one. Therefore, if you like games with challenging puzzles that you can play at your own pace (apart from one point where time is critical), this is one for you.

Sacred Gold

RPG • Ascaron Action Line (PC)

This is an excellent example of a role playing game set in a 'classic fantasy' world, where you choose a character and then develop that character by fighting or acquiring new weapons, spells etc in order to achieve the objectives of the game. This DVD pack includes the two games in the series, *Sacred* and *Sacred Underworld*. You're advised to start with *Sacred*, for the simple reason that you need a character of a certain level before you can play the second game, and you can import your characters from the completed *Sacred* (which you may already have) into it.

In *Sacred* there are six characters to choose from: gladiator, battle mage and dark

ALAN FRASER'S GAMEZONE

elf, plus seraphim, wood elf and vampiress, each of whom has totally different skills and weapons. You can therefore play the game six times and get a widely different experience each time (each character starts the game in a different location). *Sacred Underworld* can only be played with a high-level character, but introduces two further characters, a male dwarf and a female daemon, which are already at the needed level. I wouldn't advise skipping the first game and starting with either of them unless you're a well-experienced gamer or have already played *Sacred*!

In *Sacred* you have to save the kingdom of Ancaria from a demon similar to a Balrog raised by an evil mage called Shaddar; in *Sacred Underworld* a baroness of Ancaria has been kidnapped by a demon, and you have to venture into the Underworld to rescue her. As well as fighting, you can talk to characters and also meet traders to buy and sell goods. There is a huge range of equipment and skills on offer so you can customise your character extensively – you can even give him/her your own name.

The bad thing about the game from my point of view is that you can hardly go a dozen paces without having to face a new foe, so it seems to consist almost entirely of fighting. At least you can choose Silver (Easy) and even Bronze (Very Easy) difficulty levels to start with, so you can gain experience of the game without dying too many times! Bronze is available only for a small part of the game; most of the game requires Silver, and you have to complete this to move on the much harder Gold level to finally reach the end. There is also a multi-player game for people with broadband connections, although I didn't try it out. The benchmark game in this genre is *Diablo* and *Sacred/Sacred Underworld* seem very much on a par. These games are for people with quick reflexes, who can switch quickly between combat moves, spells and weapons to defeat a foe, but if you can do that, you'll love it. The 2D graphics are very good indeed.

The Sims 2

Simulation • Electronic Arts (PC)

I have to include this game because I've been playing it a long time and find it addictive! Is there an SF connection? Sort of... *The Sims 2* is an updated version of the original, in which you have to manage a neighbourhood of families from birth through school, work and family raising up to death. The basic game has been joined by two expansion packs: *The Sims 2: University* and *The Sims 2: Nightlife*. There will be a third pack, *Open for Business*, in early 2006, which will enable you to run your own family business.

There are three pre-made neighbourhoods, all of which are basically small-town America. One of these is Strangetown, obviously intended to be Roswell. There are abandoned government facilities, a crashed UFO, and even alien characters. These have blue-green skin and faceted eyes, but are otherwise human in shape. They can interbreed with humans, and one of the (male) characters is expecting an alien baby at the start of the game. All characters can be abducted by aliens, after which male characters will return pregnant, but not female ones. On the *Sims 2* website many game players in what they call their 'Community' have developed differently coloured aliens. They have also created Sim versions of characters from films and TV shows such as *Lord of the Rings* or *Star Trek*.

In all Sim neighbourhoods, Sims who die stay on the lot as ghosts and can react with living Sims (I have had two characters who were scared to death!). The *University* pack introduces a career called Paranormal – Sims who progress up this career can acquire a gadget called a Resurrector which will restore dead Sims to life. Unfortunately the effectiveness of this is governed by a fee – only the maximum amount returns the character fully, lesser amounts return them at lower levels of function right down to zombie. All deaths are attended by the Grim

Reaper, who can be bargained with. I have indeed managed to save a Sim from death in this way, although pleading usually fails.

The *Nightlife* pack introduces Vampires, who can be found on what are called Community Lots after dark. If your Sims are bitten they become vampires themselves, and from then on will not age, and can in turn make new vampires. Unfortunately they die quickly in daylight, and have to buy a snug lightproof coffin to sleep in. This makes going to work difficult...

The Sims 2 is not a game that you would play for its SF content (in fact many players dislike that part), but it does an extra element to a fascinating game.

Cold War

Action • DreamCatcher (PC)

This game released in October 2005 was sent to *Interzone* for review, but contains no SF content whatever! It's set in the 1980s, and you play journalist Matthew Carter, who is mistaken for a secret agent while on an assignment in Moscow. He is accused of trying to assassinate the Soviet President and has to go on the run to clear his name and save his life. It's what is called a 'stealth game' in that Carter has to spend most of his time sneaking around avoiding trouble. Unlike most action heroes, he doesn't have highly developed skills in shooting or unarmed combat, so his strength is his wits. Much of the game's challenge is to get Carter to combine objects he finds to build gadgets that accomplish his aims, such as a remote-detonated bomb or a grenade that releases knockout gas. The game is mission-based – after you complete a mission you get a graphic novel style cut-scene with more of the story to take you on to the next mission.

The benchmark game in this subgenre is *Splinter Cell*, and this isn't quite at that standard, but it is still has several unique features such as the gadget-building which make it attractive to play.

Tsubasa: Reservoir Chronicle Vols 1-7

CLAMP • Del Rey Manga Original, \$10.95

Kaibutsu Vols 1-6

CLAMP • Del Rey Manga Original, \$10.95

As a secret/closet *otaku* I confess that I felt a certain resentment when I first heard of the recommendation by The Reading Agency that manga titles should be introduced into school and college libraries, to encourage reluctant readers. For reading manga is surely a guilty pleasure – and seeking out titles in specialist bookshops whose shelves are lined with *gashapon*, ancient *Star Trek* memorabilia and classic Marvel titles is all part of the experience! To give it the official seal of educational approval is surely the kiss of death when it comes to enticing ‘those young people who don’t think of themselves as readers’. And no one should assume that reading manga (from right to left) is easy.

That said, however, this initiative also coincides with the big US publishers waking up to the existence of manga – no bad thing for fans, as it means many more series will now be available in translation. And manga has produced works of science fiction and fantasy that are comparable in quality and imagination with the best graphic novels of Alan Moore and Neil Gaiman.

Del Rey has linked up with Kodansha to bring out its own editions of some starry titles from top *mangaka*, in this case two new series from the four talented queens of manga: Ageha Ohkawa, Apapa Mokona, Tsubaki Nekoi and Satsuki Igarashi, who make up the team called CLAMP. CLAMP began by drawing fan comics and moved on to creating original series, starting in 1990 with *Man of Many Faces* and their first big success *RG Veda* which took its inspiration from Hindu mythology. *Tokyo Babylon* followed in 1991, establishing the style for which they have become most famous: a dark, gothic setting in which ancient forces threaten to disrupt the present, and beautiful, tortured young men (*bishonen*) struggle with their destinies and their feelings for each other.

These excellent Del Rey translations contain genuinely useful extras: explanations



Feathers & Ghostly Gifts CLAMP's Subtle Shades of Fantasy

of references in the text that Western readers might not understand (for example, Japanese TV allusions and jokes) and honorifics, which (unlike *Viz* and *Tokyopop* manga translations) are preserved in the text and give a much more uniquely Japanese flavour to the dialogue.

At its best, manga can communicate on several levels at once and *xxxHolic*, with its darkly striking and sumptuous Art Nouveau drawings, tells its stories with deceptive simplicity, each frame subtly advancing the action. The figure-drawing sometimes evokes the fairy-tale illustrations of Kay Nielsen; at other times the grotesquely baroque penmanship of Beardsley comes to mind.

A school student, Kimihiro Watanuki, haunted by spirits and ghosts which only he can see, stumbles into the little shop of the mysterious and beautiful witch Yūko Ichihara. It's "Hitsuzen," she tells him, a "naturally foreordained event. A state in which all other outcomes are impossible. A result which can only be obtained by a single causality, and other causalities would necessarily create different results." Yūko reveals that the spirits are attracted to his blood. "I wish I didn't have to see them," he blurts out and Yūko gently reminds him that "If you want to have your wish granted, you must give up something valuable." For Yūko's shop is a store in which wishes are granted – but always at a cost. Before Watanuki knows

what he is doing, his wish has been granted and he is working for Yūko.

It's not long before the end of Volume 1 of *xxxHolic* that the first crossover thread appears as a youth, Syaoran, materializes in Yūko's shop, clutching the unconscious Sakura in his arms. They have fallen out of *Reservoir Chronicle* *Tsubasa* and are in dire need of Yūko's help. In Volume 2, she explains to the confused Watanuki, that "in the world we live in, the two you saw exist...but they exist in other worlds too... They came from a different world and are living different lives...but they share the same souls."

The CLAMP universe is vast and the authors (and their readers too) take delight in making little references, large and small, to their other stories and characters. Del Rey's excellent notes mean that no one unfamiliar with CLAMP's other works need feel excluded; everything is explained – and may well send readers to seek out other series! Central to both *Tsubasa* and *xxxHolic* are the two Mokonas, one black, one white. Mokona Modoki (named after Mokona Apapa) is a typically cute (though not in an obnoxious way) manga magic creature first encountered in *Magic Knight Rayearth* 1996–8 (think Ryo-ohki in *Tenchi Muyo!* or Studio Ghibli's *Totoro*).

Yūko and Watanuki's developing relationship (mistress and servant, attractive

SARAH ASH'S MANGAZONE

older woman and young man, teacher and pupil) acts as a frame for other stories, as customers arrive in Yûko's little shop, seeking her help. These short stories take their inspiration from Japanese folk legends, although in Volume 3, the gruesome legend of the monkey's paw (first penned by W.W. Jacobs) is given a fresh twist. And what more delightful way to learn about the way the Japanese celebrate Valentine's Day than by reading *xxxHolic* 4? Although Watanuki's delicious confections are so enticingly drawn that chocolate cravings may well ensue! The relationship between Watanuki and his classmate, the dour Dômeki, and the object of their affections, the sweet-natured Himawari, becomes fraught as poor Watanuki's plans go awry. A pretty young Zashiki-Warashi (a guardian ghost) has taken a liking to him and it will take all Yûko's skills to help him and Dômeki out of this predicament.

A double date for the two boys with identical twin sisters provides the central story of this fourth volume. And here the subtlety of *xxxHolic* becomes more evident, highlighting Watanuki's insecurities as he realizes that both girls are competing for Dômeki's affections and that he is only there to make up the numbers. But something of Yûko's wisdom is beginning to rub off on Watanuki. The time witch has already seen the destructive, belittling influence of one twin on the other. "Words don't only bind yourself. They bind other people too." Now Watanuki 'sees' the chains in which the girl is bound and intervenes, so that when Yûko appears to offer her a wish, the reader has the satisfying sense that her young protégé is growing in insight and compassion.

There is an all-pervading sense that a teeming hidden supernatural world is lurking just below the surface of our 'modern' times. Snowboarding Karasu Tengu (crow tengu) with cool shades zoom down to defend the Zashiki-Warashi, an adorable pipe-fox spirit adopts Watanuki (Volume 5) and in Volume 6, Watanuki and Dômeki are drawn into a 'Gazu Hyakki Yakô' demon parade (based on

paintings from the Edo period).

The elegant artwork sometimes revels in its decorative richness (the colour spreads at the start of each volume are delightful), yet at other times is tellingly stark. The subtle alterations of expression on the characters' faces hint at hidden emotions; Watanuki, in particular, can be seen to be maturing under Yûko's influence.

By turns poetic, touchingly amusing, and genuinely chilling, *xxxHolic* is a treat; I can't wait for Volume 7!

The charming anime series *Sakura Cardcaptor* was shown on children's TV in the UK with its more sophisticated elements neatly excised or skimmed over (for example, the relationship between Sakura's older brother Tōya and his friend Yukito.) Although some readers may find the sugary quality of a magical girl series just a little too much to take, Sakura's character is far from cloyingly sweet and the depiction of the growing love she feels for her classmate Syaoran Li is touchingly realistic.

Tsubasa revisits the people of *Cardcaptor Sakura*, but intriguingly places them in another world where Sakura is the princess of Clow, Tōya is king, and Syaoran an archaeologist. Syaoran's dig uncovers a mysterious symbol which strips Sakura of her memory and endangers her life.

Sinister forces are at work as an unnamed man is glimpsed, stating his desire to acquire "The power to pass through space and time, and that which points the way, are the wings...the 'Tsubasa'."

"The price is the thing you value most," Yûko the time witch tells Syaoran, who is desperate to restore the girl he loves, "your relationship with her."

Tsubasa is thus revealed to be a quest story, in which Syaoran and his companions, Fai D. Plowright, the wizard of Seresu, and the ninja Kurogane, move from parallel world to world in search of the feathers that will restore Sakura's lost memory. Much of the interest comes from seeing how the characters react to the different worlds they find themselves

in – and in watching Syaoran staunchly continue, knowing that the girl he loves will not recognize him or remember their love when she wakes up.

The travellers move from the republic of Hanshin (Volumes 1 and 2) to the country of Koryo where they find themselves pitted against a powerful magician (Volume 3) then to the Country of Jade (Volumes 4 and 5), a land reminiscent of European fairy tales, with echoes of Perrault and Grimm: a snow-covered landscape of tangled bare branches and ruined castles, traversed by cloaked horsemen. By the end of Volume 5, they are in Oto, a country not unlike early 1900s Japan, which is terrorized by Oni (demons).

Part of the pleasure of reading *Tsubasa* is in meeting old friends (and enemies) from CLAMP's other series in new and unexpected contexts. First in Hanshin, then in Oto, the reader encounters beloved characters from CLAMP's ongoing apocalyptic manga *x/1999*, alive and well in these alternate dimensions. But when Seishirō (possibly CLAMP's most seductive and sinister villain) appears in Oto, the mood darkens.

The style of drawing in *Tsubasa* is freer, with bolder strokes and a more contemporary feel. The translator's notes are fascinating. There's much to learn about Japanese food and drink and in Volume 2 Japanese tongue twisters misquoted by one of the characters, are translated and rendered into the English equivalents.

"Primela tried to say, 'Aka maki-gami, ao maki-gami, ki maki-gami' ('Red rolled paper, blue rolled paper, yellow rolled paper') but she stumbled over the last words so it came out 'Maki-maki' ('rolled rolled'). Translator Anthony Gerard neatly re-works this as, 'Red Lorry, yellow lorry, red lorry, yellow yorry!'"

Full to the brim with magical peril and adventure, *Tsubasa* offers all the elements of a classic quest fantasy. But ultimately, it is because the reader comes to care about Syaoran and Sakura's plight, that *Tsubasa* rises above many other manga quests.

Part of this review originally appeared on The Alien Online



The Narrows

Alexander C. Irvine • Ballantine, 341pp, \$13.95

The Life of Riley

Alexander C. Irvine • Subterranean, 149pp, \$25.00

Dear Abbey

Terry Bisson • PS Publishing, 108pp, £25.00

Greetings

Terry Bisson • Tachyon Publications, 384pp, \$24.95

Guardians Don't Lie

Terry Bisson • Tachyon Publications, 162pp, \$14.95

Here are two quotes pounding on an open door, perhaps, from two more authors caught somewhere in America in the Plague Years doing end-of-the-world riffs from memory, but there is a point here. First I'll quote Terry Bisson, from 'Dear Abbey', a novella which also appears in *Greetings*, his newest full-length collection. The protagonist – about to travel into the future in a neo-Wellsian time machine, where he will soon discover what we have done to the planet in our care – is talking to a drinking companion; he raises a glass to Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, not to

praise his murders but his common sense about the future:

"So here's to Ted...Because the crazy fucker's right, unfuckingfortunately," I explained, signaling for another round. "Because we're in the middle of what E.O. Wilson calls the Sixth Extinction. Because the ongoing, relentless, merciless, and mindless destruction of the planet overrules whatever small progress might have been made against racism, nationalism, greed or ignorance of all of the above. Because they can't even make a fucking gesture of a deal to stop global warming; because they deny it's even happening, because –"

And he stops short, perhaps because he feels there is really little point in saying the obvious. There is still some reminiscential fight and edge in this short diatribe, all the same; Terry Bisson (B1942) is a pre-Boomer with a good long pre-Boomer pedigree of protest and jeremiad and articulate rage against the dying of the light. But the passage I've just quoted confesses, it seems to me, something else worth noting: a bone-weariness that I think has recently become more and more evident in pre-Boomers (including myself), but which has been eating outwards from some terminal cautery for decades, maybe from as long ago as the assassination of JFK, which happened when we were just young enough to think we were old enough to pick up the reins. Literally within hours of his death, a friend told me she thought we were done for. She did not mean the world itself, though an apocalyptic nausea afflicted most of us that November; she meant our lot was done for. She meant to say that for the rest of our lives we would be *going through the motions*. Because we had been severed. Because – like Bill in *Kill Bill 2* – we had suffered a cunning blow to the heart that allowed us to continue to pace our course awhile, quite perfectly aware that we'd been dealt with fatally, that we'd been severed from the green hills of Earth. The sprezzatura of a writer like Terry Bisson – or for that matter Bob Dylan (B1941) – is to continue walking after the hit.

None of this is course exclusive to pre-Boomers, though I think we tend to give off a particular odoriferousness of thwarted sanity...But here is another quote, written



Die-Back Tangos

again in a perfectly usable style, no more intrinsically remarkable than Bisson's. It is from the much younger Alexander C. Irvine (B1969), from his strange and intricate novella, 'The Life of Riley', which reads like a *mise en abyme* tale – what I called the Arabian Nightmare story in an entry in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997) – the kind of a dream-within-a-dream structure where every time the protagonist wakes up to reality he finds he is in a deeper dream, with no exit. 'The Life of Riley' is not exactly *mise en abyme*, though what it is may be hard to describe. One thing we do seem to know, however, is that a predecessor species has planted homo sapiens on Earth, but has bugged up a genetic trigger whose proper operation (dream on) would have kept us from committing the 20th Century on the planet. The predecessors, known as Bettys, have come back to Earth with a Project in mind: to tinker with our genes and get us back on the right course. They call us Cousins. The Administrator is speaking to her Counselor:

She did not go on, but I had heard the rest of the proposition before, in my own schooling. *Because the only perfect equilibrium is death.*

And the Cousins were certainly

JOHN CLUTE'S SCORES

approaching that point. With scarcely the technology to reach their planet's satellite, they had driven the terrestrial ecology to the point of collapse. In a very few years, their ten billion [the tale is set a couple of decades hence] would be reduced to less than half that, if the typical process of overpopulation and catastrophic die-back [in 'Dear Abbey' the die-back is ten times worse] was not forestalled by technological innovation. But machines could only delay the inevitable; the collapse would come all the same, unless the Project proved successful.

The Project is never, in fact, described, over and above some extremely vague references to its retro nature, as it is designed to rectify an aeons'-old mistake. (Neither is the very similar project in 'Dear Abbey' described; and neither in 'Dear Abbey' nor 'The Life of Riley' do we really know for sure, honest injun, that their respective projects have been properly – or tragically – aborted. Something's going on here.) But something's going on here. It is easy to notate the similarities of prognosis that shape Bisson's and Irvine's two books. What is perhaps less easy to pin down is the quite remarkable difference in attack between the two. We have already anatomized Bisson as a member of a generation for whom the world became a pantomime. From the evidence of 'The Life of Riley', Irvine seems to represent a generation for whom the world Bisson mourns had already passed before he was born, for whom the extinction crisis we are entering is his birthright, and for whom the network of insights and answers provided by a genre like sf had become stale – "I had heard the rest of the proposition before" – before he was a tinkle. Irvine is a 21st Century writer. The answers and freedoms of SF no longer work for him as they still work imaginatively for Bisson, despite the older man's clear despair. For Irvine (at least in this tale) SF is a closed book; a grammar without egress (look at the quote: how the

central SF premise of 'The Life of Riley' is couched as the paraphrase of a remembered conversation which itself summarizes an indefinite number of even earlier conversations); an Arabian Nightmare.

I don't want to break the backs of two good books with much more of this, but it does strike me that – though both of them are based on near identical presumptions about the devastations in store for the planet over the next few decades, and both of them are fables of exogamy in which homo sapiens is doomed unless a bridegroom from afar saves our bacon – they clearly represent two deeply divergent ways of doing SF. Bisson's tale is an example of what I increasingly like to call the *free fantastic*, stories (like most fantasies) which take off from a deep inherent premise or promise that the world of the past two centuries either constitutes an Escape from Prison; or allows that Escape; or both. Irvine's tale, on the other hand, whose interlocking storylines encase each other into an icy belatedness, is an example of the *bound fantastic*, stories (like most horror) which take off from a deep inherent premise or threat that the world itself is all the parole we're going to get, that we are bound to the Wheel, that the face of the world is the face in the mirror. (The only 21st Century form of sf which is not so bound is space opera, which is I guess why I, for one, love it with such a passion.)

The very title of 'Dear Abbey' is an homage to a man – Edward Abbey (1927–1989) – who thought it was still possible to wrest the fate of the planet back from its destroyers, whom he still it possible to distinguish from the rest of us. His near advocacy, in *The Monkey-Wrench Gang* (1975), of sabotage directed against the corporate owners and despoilers of the environment 30 years ago, may seem poignantly gestural in 2006, and Bisson gives us no hint he really thinks any different. The Dear Abbey of his novella is the name of a plan to infect humanity with a genetic modifier of some sort which (as already noted) Bisson never describes; to create this trigger device, it will be necessary to travel

into the future, where certain mapping operations based (presumably) on the human genome have been successfully completed.

An old Abbeyite, who narrates, and a brilliant Chinese scientist, who is a grown-up version of the comic slick-fantasy savant Wilson Wu from *Numbers Don't Lie* (see below), join together to follow arcane instructions from the end of time and jump into the future, by stages. At each stage – a year hence, ten years, a hundred, a thousand, a million – the two humans are met by interlocutors themselves briefed from the end of time, and are given lessons in what the future holds, just as the Time Traveller in *The Time Machine* (1895) is. What they learn is that that most of our worst expectations cash out, and that the human race almost murders the planet, almost dies out; but not quite. Two AIs – one which mimes Gaia, and one which evolves out of information nets into a kind of infinitely adoring superdog which keeps its masters – monitor the subsequent, highly controlled evolution of humanity. Meanwhile the two protagonists gain, or do not gain, the wherewithal to active Dear Abbey, and after visiting the end of time make their return, and the tale shuts.

So 'Dear Abbey' walks the walk. But any sense that it is a genuine tale of the *free fantastic* – or that Bisson accepts in his heart that there is an Escape from Prison – founders precisely on the clarity of the telling. This is not SF by a believer in the engines described; it is SF *remembered*, with deep affection; it is as though Bisson were retelling a tale of childhood, around the campfire. But don't ask what's being used for fuel. Bisson surely knows, but this time he's not saying.

'The Life of Riley' also presents itself as a deep body English of its master's voice. It is divided into four parts, each of which reads as a parodic intensification into near-absurdity of old ways of telling. Riley is a government agent, who is somehow involved in stopping (or maybe setting off) the Project to re-set humanity which the alien Bettys have secretly set in place. Part One follows Riley's wife/widow to be

through an unutterably hectic cops-and-agents chase, which ends on a cliffhanger. Part Two tells in a mortmain voice of inhumanly clenched serenity of the last days before the death of two aliens, successful or not successful in the end. Part Three drowns us in some sublimely stupid fundamentalist Christians, who mean to sabotage the project. The final part brings everybody together, but in a state of mutual nescience. And it all ends before it begins, like dozens of rabbits caught in headlights. There may be no driver behind the wheel. In which case we're truly sunk.

Indeed, 'The Life of Riley' is all last pages with no exit. The oceans have risen fifty feet. Manhattan is a diked polder which is soon breached. The heat is intense everywhere. The planet is shaking us off like fleas. A few KILROY WAS HERE signs of Thomas Pynchon have been planted in the text, specifically the Pynchon *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973); but the Pynchon I feel inside 'The Life of Riley' is the Pynchon of *Vineland* (1990), a novel whose main purpose seem to be to keep its cast from getting too close to the end of the century. 'The Life of Riley' is about what

might have happened to the cast of *Vineland* if they'd wandered up here in time.

That the concussed tangle of all the last pages of 'The Life of Riley' is an entirely deliberate effect is obvious enough; but *The Narrows*, Irvine's other 2005 book, demonstrates the case very thoroughly indeed. The title is a slightly mangled translation from the French meaning of Detroit, and is set there in World War Two. *The Narrows* is a fantasy – various kinds of hedge magic exist in this version of the world; golems are being manufactured in Henry Ford's River Rouge complex to fight the Nazis in Europe; and the Red Dwarf, the supernatural figure whose appearance always augurs ill for Detroit, is tormenting Jared Cleaves, the protagonist of the tale; but there is no magus in the world, no hint of apocalypse or instauration: magic in *The Narrows* is crosshatched into a world very similar to our own. It is this incremental, almost (but not quite) offhand crosshatching that makes the substance of the book, a family romance tale involving Jared and his wife and parents and obnoxious child and other relatives, so convincing.

The book may not, in fact, entirely work. Its deliberate refusal of ostentation – the absence of any bigtime magus stuff that might rip the veil off the War and maybe give us a cleansed world – does almost inevitably lead to a conclusion more noise than sense. If anything, the fact that the climactic scenes take place during the historical Detroit race riots of 1943 further muddies the waters, as we are unlikely to know, unless we happen to be expert in Detroit history, whether these events have been subtly rejigged to allow the Red Dwarf, and all the other fantasy elements we've mentioned, some *consequence* in the tale. And other complicatednesses similarly fail quite to jell: Jared has been bedeviled by a passel of secret service agents and German spies, and Irvine tumbles them all together in the noise at the end, and dismisses them.

What he leaves us with, though, is what makes *The Narrows* so memorable. Jared is a bit thick between the ears, though clearly educable. He is haunted by a childhood injury to his hand – caused by the Red Dwarf – which disqualifies him from service. His inability to get around this 'humiliation', and his discomfort that his wife makes more

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than he does, are realistically conceived; and heartwarming transcended. Jared's job as an assembly worker in the golem factory gives Irvine lots of opportunities to paint a mosaic portrait of the unseen but astonishing loathsome Henry Ford. And all the members of Jared's family feel utterly real and we want even more of them than we get (except, perhaps, for Jared's deeply loved and well-observed but really kind of creepy two-year-old daughter, who makes one long for an Uncle W.C. Fields in the cast). *The Narrows* may not quite tie it all together, but Irvine's disinclination to tamper with Big Story tropes may be understood as a sane, 21st Century disinclination to expose some precious to the badlands up here. Because the residue, the story that *The Narrows* exudes like nectar, is indeed precious. It is a story of how some humans learn to love one another back there.

Let us circle back and come to a halt with a final glance at the world of fable. *Numbers Don't Lie* is set of three connected stories from the 1990s whose moderately gormless protagonist calls on – or is called on by

– almost crazed but magically competent scientist Wilson Wu at various points in his hegira towards marriage with a Southern belle who is probably smarter than he is. The first tale, set in Brooklyn and the Moon, introduces a matter transmitter which is less important than the Volvo Lore which Bisson, who has worked as a mechanic, is able to impart. (I have myself driven a Volvo lots; he is precisely accurate about the people who minister unto them, and about the kind of places they live.) The second tale involves the end of the universe, which is averted. The third gets the young not-quite lovers finally hitched. It is all as though Bisson had decided to tell a batch of Nelson S. Bond stories as – as it were – *counterfactuals*. *Numbers Don't Lie* is about as lovable as it is possible to get these days. It is a book for the campfire.

More gravely, several of the stories assembled in *Greetings*, all of them first published this century, have the same loving kindness of touch. 'I Saw the Light' (2002) exquisitely conflates Clarke/Kubrick's 2001 (1968) and James Tiptree Jr's 'And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill's Side' (1971); almost without a word being spoken to its

ostensible point, which is nevertheless utterly clear, it is a heartbreaker fable of exogamy. In fact all Bisson's stories are heartbreakers, though they almost never tell us why they are tearing into us so. The only near failure in the book is the very long 'Greetings' (2003), where Bisson's astonishing capacity to generate images of eidolon like clarity (just as Nelson S Bond did in his own safer sphere back then) comes acropper up against the fact that these images tend intrinsically not to work when they are 'fleshed out' in long narratives. In 'Greetings' the *image* of involuntary euthanasia is wrenching and poignant; but the workings out of the storyline, with car chases and old hippies and Homeland Security thugs, seriously corrodes the instant of vision. 'The Old Rugged Cross' (2001), on the other hand, though just as silly *if narrated at length*, conveys its savage anti-Christian message with a perfectly weighted venom at its perfect heft, like a great ghost story.

But of course that's what I've been suggesting all along. That, in 2005, SF is ghost stories around the campfire. That we do not always need to know what the fire burns. That it is a good thing to go on talking after the hit.





Justina Robson's fourth novel is about how we deal with possibility. At the end of *Natural History*, humanity grasped the possibilities offered by Stuff – a disarmingly pragmatic name for a magical alien technology – with both hands. In *Living Next-Door to the God of Love*, Stuff is commonplace. With the aid of Unity, the intelligence guiding Stuff, humans have access to 'sidebar universes', worlds where they can do anything, be anyone. They can go to Metropolis, for example, and be a hero (or a villain); they can go to Sankhara, and live in a fantasy.

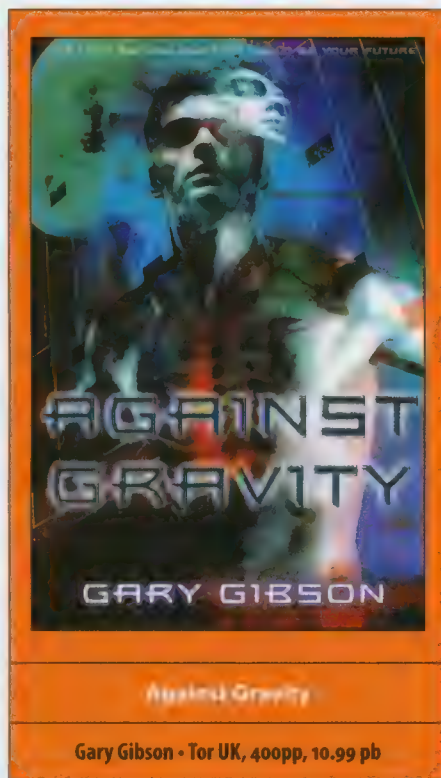
Unity is a collective consciousness, made up of the dreams and experiences of everyone it's ever met. To become one with Unity – to 'translate' – is to disappear into a welcoming transcendence. Whether or not it represents oblivion isn't clear, but most people aren't too keen on finding out. That includes Jalaeka, who is a reflection of humanity even if he's not quite human himself; and it's a problem, because Unity wants to claim Jalaeka, and is not above translating whole universes to do so.

Despite the high-stakes scenario, and a striking opening set in the aforementioned city of heroes, the novel's central story is relatively quiet. For most of its length, it is a study of the relationships between three characters: Jalaeka; Greg, a regular human researching Stuff and Unity; and Francine, a 15-year-old runaway from reality. Each character narrates sections of the story, the differing perspectives illuminating difference facets of the plot. Robson is not a writer of beautiful prose, and her landscapes, for all their variety (Sankhara is partially remade each night, according to the dreams of its inhabitants), often seem rather

dry; but she has a talent for characterisation, and is able to capture the uncertainty and rawness of strong emotion with some skill.

The result is on one level a romance, but an uncommonly honest and thought-provoking one, and one in which Robson never forgets the fantastic context within which her story is taking place, using it to explore and emphasise the reactions of the characters. It turns out, for example, that avatars of Unity can call up instances of translated beings, essentially recreating them from Stuff. They literally carry others in their memories. Linked identity is also used to explore how the experiences of others can affect and change us. At times, as they become closer, Francine literally relives Jalaeka's memories, and the lines between them blur as their experiences converge. What, the story asks, does a relationship ask of our individuality, our self-identity? And since this is a book in which the personal reflects the cosmic, we may as well also ask, what is the cost of engaging with the universe? They are unanswerable questions, but Robson's examination of them is interesting and dramatic, full of grand melancholy and sudden joy. This is a book about possibility, as I said; and, of course, about love.

Niall Harrison



Against Gravity is Gary Gibson's second novel. It follows Kendrick Gallmon, erstwhile investigative journalist from the former USA, now a refugee in late 21st Century Edinburgh. His body is riddled with nanotech augmentations which have gone haywire, mutating and growing within him to an

unknown end. Along with hundreds of others he was experimented upon by 'Los Muertos', the paranoid remnants of the US military, who were attempting to build the ultimate soldier in the aftermath of the collapse of the United States.

Like many of his fellow 'Lab-Rats', he sees visions from time to time, but when his life is saved by a ghost from his past in The Maze, the underground lab-fortress where the augmentation research was performed, he is set upon a journey that will lead him to hunting down and confronting all the pieces of the puzzle. These include more rogue nanotech, ex-comrades both friendly and hostile, companies run by fundamentalist scientists, an unreachable orbital habitat and the out-of-control AIs that infest it.

This is broad-spectrum SF. Gibson hasn't tried to stick to a set corner of the playground, and has produced a novel with broad appeal and satisfying writing, taking a fairly standard handful of ideas and knocking them together into a well paced, readable story. The perspective stays with Gallmon as the lead character, and the flashbacks and remembrances are well timed and careful, filling us in on Gallmon's past, yet rarely straying into info-dump. Underlying the muscular yet unobtrusive writing style is the broad theme of faith, and how hard it is to see the same transcendent light as someone else; Gallmon and many of the other characters frequently have to confront the line between certainty and faith, trusting their lives to destiny. The characterisation is distinct, if a trifle thin, with some of Gallmon's old cronies coming across as somewhat two-dimensional, but no worse than the 'real people' that infest the pages of the bestseller lists. But the pace is smooth and measured, avoiding the weapons-based combat-scene excesses of military SF while retaining its vigour and energy. A strong second novel from an aspiring member of the growing Edinburgh set.

Paul Raven



The Hickory Staff, the first book in The Eldarn Sequence, is a first novel bought to us by a new writing duo and employs an old fantasy cliché I've not seen used for many years.

The story begins in a mining community in Colorado in 1870, with the deposit of a large amount of silver in a local bank by a miner who, to say the least, is acting rather strangely. The miner also rents a safe deposit box, and then disappears never to be seen again.

Over a hundred years later, Steven Taylor is working at the local First National Bank at Idaho Springs – doing an inventory of

'dormant' accounts. One account particularly draws his attention because it has remained untouched for a century. Accruing interest and paying only minimal account management charges, it now holds several million dollars. In an effort to trace any next of kin who may not be aware of the existence of this account, and despite warnings from his boss about confidentiality and secrecy of the safe deposit box system, Steven decides to open the box for clues. What he finds is a bit of puzzle – an old lump of rock and a tapestry.

Enter the fantasy cliché – the tapestry transports Steven and his friend Mark to a strange world called Rona where magic, swords, and bows and arrows are the weapons of the day. Rona is under the thrall of an evil occupying force, but fortunately (or, what a surprise!) Steven and Mark are discovered by the good guys. Despite their obvious need to get home again (Steven has a new girlfriend who is destined to follow him to Rona – unbeknown to him of course), circumstances slowly drag them into the struggle for Rona's freedom.

This is an engaging tale, if a little plodding at times. The events with the mining community in the 1870s give it a depth that is slowly unravelled as the plot progresses. Magic is not explained, nor is the fact that Steven and Mark have suddenly learned a foreign language (they, at least, do question this development), and although Steven becomes aware that Hannah has landed in a different part of Rona, the story doesn't follow her exploits very much. It is also American – very American indeed, and maybe it's just me but some things grated with me from time to time, like the tendency towards simplistic moral attitudes and... Jelly-donuts!

Overall, I enjoyed this tale and will certainly read on when the next tome is published. It's 1980s fantasy taken out of the cupboard and dusted off – refreshingly retro!

Vikki Lee

A Feast for Crows

George R.R. Martin • HarperCollins, 755pp, £18.99 hb

Well, here it is. After a delay of some five years, Martin finally delivers the Book Four of what seems an ever-growing and expanding saga (now slated at seven books), to the relief, one suspects, of both his publishers, and the many readers who have been left with more unresolved and unravelling plot threads than a fair sized tapestry.

Or is it? In fact, what is here is really half a book. Martin has taken the multiple plot-lines of the previous volumes, the war and games of thrones across the Reach, the threat of the wildlings at the Wall in the north, and the rise of the young dragon queen Daenerys across

the sea, and split them into two volumes, of which this is the first. It is a decision forced largely by necessity, but not without cost.

What's here: the stories of Cersei, queen regent at King's Landing, who will stop at nothing to safeguard the throne of her eight-year-old son, Tommen; her brother Jaime, Tommen's father, dubbed the Kingslayer, and now (ironically) leader of the Kingsguard; the warrior maid Brienne, searching for Sansa Stark, abducted by the outlaw Sandor Clegane, the Hound; Sansa herself now masquerading under another name, as is her sister; Arya; Samwell Tarley, charged by Jon Snow, Lord Commander of the Wall, to deliver Maester Aemon, the wet-nurse Gilly and Jon's child safely to Oldtown; the Dornish princess, Arriane, self-styled Queenmaker, hoping to raise a rebellion to supplant Tommen with his sister Myrcella; and of the expansion of the viking Ironmen, under their new king, Euron Crow's Eye, with his dreams of conquest and dragons.

What's not: any of the events at the Wall or in the north, of Jon Snow or his younger brother Bran, or across the sea as the young dragon queen Daenerys consolidates her conquest of the Slaver cities (except as a taster chapter from the next volume, *A Dance With Dragons*), or of Cersei and Jamie's brother, the monstrous dwarf, Tyrion.

Does it work? Well, almost. At times the complexity of the plot and sheer wealth of detail threaten to overwhelm the tale – Martin seems determined to flesh out a history and back-story for every minor character. But it is still only half a story, and leaves the reader abandoned *in media res*, particularly when Martin pulls yet another cliffhanger ending for one of his major characters, which now, presumably, won't be resolved until the book *after* the next one. It's a cruel trick, and you have to hope it's not going to be another five year wait until we can pick up the threads again.

Steve Jeffery

Coyote Rising

Allen Steele • Orbit, 515pp, £6.99 pb

SF trilogies are often like mountains: dauntingly insurmountable, seemingly never-ending, littered with dense foliage, treacherous terrain and abundantly cryptic. But amid the defiant behemoths, such as Kim Stanley Robinson's epic Mars trilogy, or anything by Stephen Baxter or Larry Niven, there lies Allen Steele. With *Coyote Rising*, Steele has combined an epic scope, astute characterisation, and a true sense of wonder, packaging them into a digestible novel that fulfils a simple, yet enthralling quotient: the 'what-if' principle.

Coyote Rising is the second act in the Coyote

sequence, comprised of eight stories previously published in *Asimov's*, and continues the struggle of the fugitive Alabama colonists' new life on the distant moon, Coyote. However, even though they've managed to flee the imperialism of the United Republic of America, the residents of Liberty have abandoned their home for the wilderness as a new regime of 'social collectivism' arrives aboard a Western Union starship, led by the arrogant yet inefficient Matriarch Luisa Hernandez, and a garrison of Union Guardsmen.

As more starships arrive every few months, the Union's hold on Coyote strengthens, and all the social and economical ills have been brought from Earth under the misconceived notion that life on Coyote is better than on Earth. The original colonists undertake a radical uprising to rid their home of the oppressive Union. However, they come to realise that there will be no guarantee any of them will live to see Coyote freed.

Allen Steele presents a plausible scenario for colonisation, allowing for the realities of harsh living conditions and unforgiving terrain – Coyote is a genuinely 'alien' environment, suggesting that it is as much a frontier as 19th century America was. Steele weaves a deft tale, and imbues the story with strong, believable characterisation throughout, whether it be reluctant resistance leader Carlos Montero, or the acerbic Matriarch Hernandez. *Coyote Rising* is written with confidence, a sparkling attention to detail, and a leisurely – but not languid – pace. Steele has created a solid future of attainable possibility; far from fanciful, instead superlatively realised, executed with an assurance that will leave you waiting impatiently for the conclusion in *Coyote Frontier*.

Stephen Bromby

Dragon's Eye

James A. Hetley • Ace, 355pp, \$14.00 pb

The Hollywood monster that is King King has blocked out the sun in Maine and it is a brave man who sets his own novels there. But the sheer scale of King tends to hide the fact that the man, for all his flaws, can write.

Hetley's courage is undoubted. Unfortunately, his folksy style tends to come across as a bit rough and ready, and that, to a large extent, lets him down. It also limits his emotional palate, leaving all his characters with the same tough, sunny voice. Therefore it takes a couple of chapters before one is able to accept the novel on its own terms.

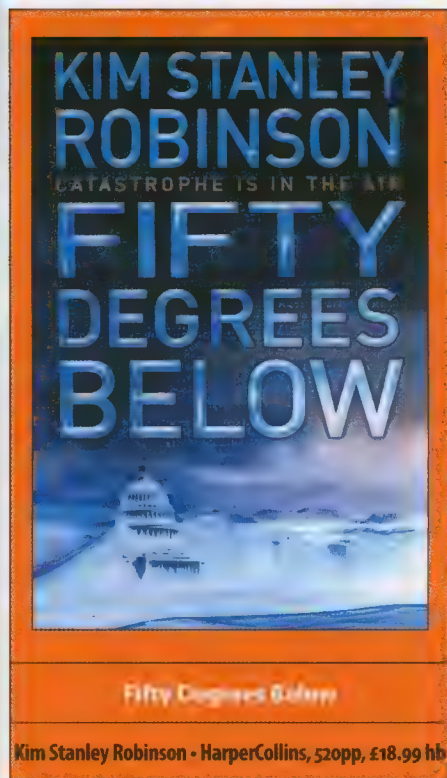
The seaboard town of Stonefort is somewhat off the beaten track, thus providing a degree of cover for the slow-burning triangular power struggle that has been going on for longer than anyone can remember. We have the Morgans,

a patriarchal clan of freebooters who fund their shadowy existence through such means as art theft and smuggling, and are in thrall to a magical being called the Dragon. They are descended from thirteenth century Welshmen. We also have the Haskells, their sometime allies who are a (for want of a better word) coven of women who are based around an enchanted house in the town. They are descendents of the original coastal tribe. Then there are the unfortunately named Pratts, the villains of the piece. They smuggle *drugs*.

Dan, head Morgan, is captured investigating the Pratts, who have fallen in with an evil Columbian conjurer who wants access to the powers possessed by both the Morgans and Haskells. The rest of the novel is the story of Dan's attempted rescue by an ensemble cast from both clans. It's an engaging enough tale, although too much of it takes place outside of its own pages. Many corpses are made but no one has the misfortune to die in front of us until we're nearly at the conclusion, and the Pratts themselves hardly trouble the typesetter after the first chapter, despite their constant involvement.

Stephen King would have made this three times the length and that, perhaps, would have allowed *Dragon's Eye* to breathe.

Jim Steel



The *Science in the Capital* books may be Kim Stanley Robinson's third Big Trilogy, but by the end of the 500-plus pages of *Fifty Degrees Below* it's clear that, much more than with the *Mars* novels or the *Three Californias*, this time around Robinson really is telling one long story, lopped into chunks for publishing (and

presumably writing) purposes. *Fifty Degrees Below* describes the immediate aftermath of the cataclysmic flood of Washington, DC that ended *Forty Signs of Rain*, with little concession to either beginning or ending. It tries to shape a story from the chaos that follows a tipping point, by describing the search for a new equilibrium.

And as it is in the world, so it is inside Frank Vanderwal's head. The forceful sociobiologist experienced his own tipping point at the end of the previous book, the epiphany that 'an excess of reason is itself a form of madness', and his search for a new balance forms the bulk of *Fifty Degrees Below*. For a story about such dramatic and widespread upheaval it's a surprisingly narrow focus – particularly when compared to the panorama of the *Mars* novels – but it works well. At the start of the book, having come to the end of the one-year contract on his flat, and facing sky-high rents in the wake of the flood, Frank makes the radical decision that he doesn't need an apartment. Instead he sets up what he thinks of as a distributed home: a gym for showers, the office for during the day, restaurants for food, and at night first a van to sleep in, and later a tree house. All the while he muses about ways of living, thinking his way towards a philosophy of 'permaculture', a more sustainable way of existing. Key to that is integration; as one character tells Frank, "it is easy to live multiple lives! What is hard is to be a whole person." As it is in Frank Vanderwal's head, so it is in the world.

Meanwhile the Quiblers – Charlie the politician's advisor, Anna the scientist, Joe the toddler, the three together surely one of the most satisfyingly real families in SF – are still busy, but their story is very much in the background. So too are most of the grand engineering projects initiated by the National Science Foundation to mitigate the now-unarguable climate change, and a lot of the political manoeuvring that goes with them. Despite this, the novel doesn't entirely avoid the distortions of polemic. Robinson cares obviously and deeply for our planet, and about what we're doing to it; at the same time, he is enough of an optimist to think that having created these problems, we are also capable of solving them. Consequently the plot of *Fifty Degrees Below* is sometimes predictable, and sometimes absurd. But then, perhaps that's the point. The absurdity is calculated, and carefully managed – witness the brilliant payoff to the Social Science Experiment in Elective Politics – and, when you come down to it, in some senses *right*. It is crazy that we have let things get to this state; and it's hard not to feel that if we can muddle through as well as the characters in Robinson's story, we might be doing better than we deserve.

Niall Harrison



A Scottish speculative fiction anthology is a relatively rare beast, and if you're looking for one that also embraces science fiction you're going to find tumbleweed – rolling past a small number of notable releases over the last hundred years. David Pringle's (playful) theory for this deficit is explained in his introduction to *Nova Scotia*: it's due to the rise of pulp-magazine Space Opera in America during the 1920s and 30s. This rise had four prime creators, all of whom were probably of Scottish descent and two of whom even had Scottish surnames.

With the Scottish descendants busy doing it over in the US, the UK market was entertained by longer stories, novels from the likes of Robert Louis Stevenson and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The anthology publishers, including Penguin and Faber, spent much of their time publishing Scottish fantasy and supernatural stories, along with large amounts of Scottish poetry, an area where Scotland can trace a rich cultural inheritance back to the 17th Century and beyond.

So perhaps it's appropriate that *Nova Scotia* opens with a poem from one of Scotland's best known poets, Edwin Morgan. Brief and concise, it builds a formidable depth of story in a mere fifty-one lines, and it also illustrates the non-traditional criteria used by *Nova Scotia*'s editors when selecting stories for the book.

It soon becomes obvious, over the next two stories, just how broad the editorial criteria has been: Ken MacLeod's 'A Case of Consilience' considers religious motivation and cross species communication, and is

followed by timeless love in a futuristic setting in Hannu Rajaniemi's 'Deus ex Homine'. Each of the subsequent stories also open up new territories of speculative fiction, without repetition, and the resulting variety is one of *Nova Scotia*'s biggest strengths.

It's also pleasantly surprising that humour is rife in this anthology. 'Pisces Ya Bas' by Gavin Inglis features one of the funniest foul-mouthed fish to ever inhabit a park pond; William Meikle's 'Total Mental Quality, By The Way' takes a trip into the consequences of being an obsessive geek; spell-casting for the vindictive female comes under the microscope in 'Sophie and the Sacred Fluids' by Andrew C. Ferguson; and clever black humour is also represented when the devil takes on a couple of Scottish hardnuts in Charles Stross's 'Snowballs's Chance'.

Some serious aspects are examined too. Deborah J. Miller takes a (slightly gentle) look at physical abuse in 'Vanilla for the Lady'. Coping with physical disabilities and love (and the fairy-world) is honestly handled in John Grant's 'The Hard Stuff'. And the lasting effects of The Great War are atmospherically presented in Marion Arnott's tale 'Lest We Forget', a story so full of emotion that it leaves lasting effects on the reader too.

The remaining thirteen stories embrace time travel, industrial workers, local mythological history, crime mysteries and more. While the subject matter scatters them, the Scottish theme draws them all back together again into a cohesive whole – although with Jack Deighton's 'Dusk' the Scottish link is stretched to its most tenuous. But Scottish or not, it's such a touchingly melancholy tale that it's hard to object to its inclusion.

This sense of Scottishness permeates much of the dialogue in *Nova Scotia* but it comes to the fore in Matthew Fitt's 'Criggie'. With the spread of English forcing out our cultural language diversity, it's nice to see a story written entirely in Scots ('He fechts tae stey calm but awready the flegs are raivellin throu him'). However, the story is somewhat inaccessible if, like me, you lack the ability to easily translate the words in your head (but then I has problems with Iain Banks's *Feersum Endjinn* too). Only those with the mental agility for phonetic conversion are going to romp through this one with speed.

By the time you reach the end of *Nova Scotia*, you realise that there's an additional reason why it's a rare beastie: there's not a bad story in there. Usually, it's easy to select a story that you didn't like as much as the others but this time, it can't be done. There's just a myriad of fascinating worlds nestled in the pages of this anthology – enjoy them, savour them, and absorb the essence of what it is to be Scottish.

Sandy Auden

The Extraordinary Voyage of Jules Verne

Eric Brown • PS Publishing, 137pp, £10.00 pb

How do you celebrate the 100th anniversary of the death of Jules Verne? The answer, for PS Publishing and Eric Brown, is by releasing a novella which pays fitting tribute to both the man himself and his formidable imagination.

'The Extraordinary Voyage of Jules Verne' introduces Verne in the years before his famous novels were written. Hoodwinked into helping a drunk, Verne is first transported back sixty million years, to the Upper Cretaceous, where he is captured by aliens and promptly freed by a rebel called Eliza Riley. Verne is then taken to the 25th Century, where he meets the tyrannical Robur, and gets caught up in Eliza's battle to free the Earth from Robur's suffocating rule.

Verne's character in this novella fits reasonably well with what is known of the writer's personality. Certainly Verne's idealistic attitude and optimistic outlook have been captured accurately in 'Voyage', along with his love of travel. But Verne's Catholicism is completely missing and his reputed unease around women has actually been reversed, with Verne stepping forward almost eagerly to comfort and aid Eliza. Fortunately, the differences are not important – the Verne in 'Voyage' is still an enjoyable protagonist.

Verne's own stories also play a large part of this tribute. It's really quite fun watching for the events that were to trigger various novels in Verne's future – *Cinq Semaines en Balloon* makes an appearance, as does his 1872 novel *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, and then there's Robur. A character who first appears as a megalomaniacal inventor of flying machines in Verne's *Robur the Conqueror* and becomes a dangerous madman in *Master of the World*, this latest Robur certainly hasn't changed.

Eric Brown has clearly done his homework and put together an entertaining story of one of SF's most famous writers. Like Brown's other novellas, 'Voyage' rips along at pace, relentlessly bounding hither and thither. His use of language is atmospheric and appropriately Victorian, creating a convincing sense of history. And for all its shorter length, 'Voyage' still delivers ample high adventure, characters with depth and numerous tributes to Verne – and just for good measure, if you look closely, there's even a tribute to H.G. Wells's *Time Machine* as well.

Sandy Auden

The Periodic Table of SF

Michael Swanwick • PS Publishing, 274pp, £25.00 hb

It's happening more and more these days, stories originally launched on the internet are

finding their way into print in special volumes later – Herbert & Anderson's short tales from *Dune* are one example, and Michael Swanwick's *Periodic Table of SF* are another. These tales, one for each element in the Periodic Table, first ran on the *SciFiction* website. Appearing at a rate of one per week, they set Swanwick a significant time challenge and other authors may have been tempted to take a short cut and re-use some ideas. To Swanwick's credit, the results of his labours form a highly diverse and imaginative collection, with recurring themes but no regurgitated stories.

The central themes of SF are well represented in *Periodic Table*, including alien invasion, huge spaceships, solar system exploration, robots, and genetic enhancements. But Swanwick has also pulled in other genres so that hard SF sits side by side with The Lone Ranger, werewolves, alternate histories and necrophilia.

The sheer range of subject matter really is quite bewildering. As well as the above topics, Argon's tale is a twisted fantasy featuring elf-queen Gloradrial and a rather inept archer. The tale manages to doff its hat at Tolkien while simultaneously taking the mickey out of it. 'Under's Game' is the story for Magnesium and is a gentle homage to Orson Scott Card (one of several such homages to other authors to be found here). Silicon's tale features programmable breasts, fronting up direct comment on current social trends and obsessions; while Radium's tale is an emotional introspection from Pierre Curie as he reflects on life with Marie.

Each story brings new delights to entertain the reader but there are two features of Swanwick's writing that makes these tales all the more skilful. Firstly, each of these stories is delivered in about a page (just two sides) of writing so they're short-short stories that create a brand new scenario within their limited confines. Such brevity is an underestimated skill and Swanwick makes it look easy – a sure sign of a master at work. Secondly, and perhaps most enjoyably, is the humour. Almost all the stories read like funny anecdotes, tall tales told late at night when alcohol has mellowed the mood.

Overall, it's a book best read in short bursts, to appreciate each story properly, because if you read them all in one go they coalesce in the memory into one mosaic lump. And that would be a shame because there's some great little gems in this collection that should be savoured individually.

Sandy Auden

The Translation of Bastian Test

Tom Arden • Immanion Press, 261pp, £12.99 pb

Tom Arden has always written across a range of genres, from the five volumes of

his Orokon fantasy series to his intimate short science fiction stories like 'The Volvox Immersion'. With *The Translation of Bastian Test*, he's managed to incorporate all of those genres into one delightful novel.

It's 1926, and Bastian Test's teenage life is turned upside down when his mother dies in a fire at their home. Having led a very sheltered life, the naive lad is cast into the world to endure numerous encounters with some very peculiar people – like cocktail-swilling Magnolia Touch; and the pin-striped lawyer Quench, a man with some strange dressing habits after dark; and the florid Farley Elphinstone an actor-manager with two intense children. But it's not until Bastian reaches his guardian's castle at Drumhallurick in Scotland that he finally discovers the truth behind his secluded upbringing and faces the biggest decision of his life so far...

It's easy to spot the coming of age story in this novel, but less visible are the plethora of other topics and themes that lurk within the pages. It's positively packed with science fiction, mysteries, outright fantasy, spiritual undertones and dangerous sensuality. There's also a very atmospheric Victorian feel to the settings, almost Dorian Gray-like with its restrained outward attitudes and dark decadent secrets.

As for the story itself, it reads like a Mobius strip – it doesn't matter which character's thread you follow, they always come back round to themselves. Events in real life don't tend to be as neat as they are here, but the overall effect of this approach is to induce a dream-like sensation, a quietly disturbing notion of unreality. The weird events continuously build on each other and when the mysteries start unravelling they do so at pace, making it well worth maintaining your patience through the first, slower, half of the book.

Little in this book is what it seems, and Arden has produced a fascinating climax that's both gently provocative and deviously complex.
Sandy Auden

Come of the Frost

Kim Wilkins • Gollancz, 435pp, £5.99 pb

Victoria Scott is an eminently rational scientist, sceptical of psychics, seances, lotteries and love... which is exactly what makes this extravagantly romantic fantasy novel work so well. Wilkins's genius in this book is to use the trappings of a high romance to create a gritty contemporary fantasy novel with seriously dark undercurrents, a pulse-pounding narrative – and, oh yes, a completely gripping love story.

One thousand years ago, the Norse god Vadir fell in love with a human woman and swore to join her forever in Midgard (Earth). Unfortunately, Vadir's father wasn't ready to

let him go. Rather than lose his son, Odin murdered Vadir's lover... and earned Vadir's hatred. Now, though, Vadir's thousand-year wait has finally been rewarded. His lover has been reborn as Victoria Scott, an English climatologist working on a remote Norwegian island called Odinsey. When Vadir arrives on the island, a perfect reunion hovers within the realm of possibility... but with amoral Loki scheming in the background, and several vulnerable spectators in the way of Odin's rage, history may be about to repeat itself with a vengeance.

Even the minor characters in this novel are distinctive and engaging, and the imagery of magic – from gods to wood sprites to the powerful natural beauty of Norwegian forests – is vivid and concrete. As Victoria slowly opens her mind to the possibility of a love that could last for a thousand years, she's forced to confront the terrifying truths that lurk in the darkness of the ancient forests around her isolated cabin. By the second half of the book, the story has taken on an inexorable, dread-filled momentum. This is the kind of book that keeps you up all night, racing through the pages, torn between fear of what will probably happen and hope of what might possibly still save the day. At the end, Vadir, Victoria and the reader are forced to confront the darkness within themselves to ask: what sacrifices are worth making, for love? Wilkins may not offer any definitive answers, but this is a book that's well worth reading, even for hardened sceptics.

Stephanie Burgis

Swarmthief's Dance

Deborah Miller • Tor UK, 314pp, £10.99 pb

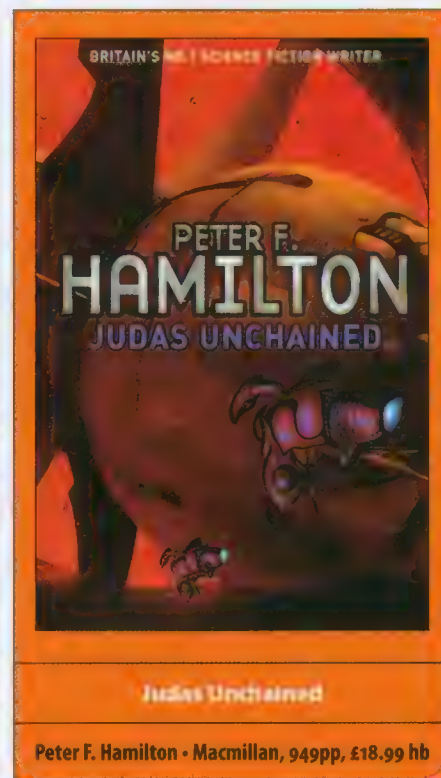
Deborah Miller's *Swarmthief's Dance* – book one of The Swarmthief Trilogy – mixes the intrigues of powerful, amoral gods with the confused, earnest attempts of humans to do right in a morally ambiguous fantasy universe. Long ago, Rann, the god of the underworld, schemed to win dominance over Aria, the Nulefi spirit he loved. It went tragically wrong, and Aria and all her sisters were erased from existence... until now. A hint of their recovery lies in the magical, insectile Swarms ridden by trained Bakkujasi riders to enforce the will of the Shemari priests. As the Swarms begin to produce theologically impossible eggs, Rann once more enters the realm of power politics... and several humans are swept up, unknowing, into an age-old struggle.

The two central human characters, Vivreki and Asoori, are childhood friends now leading drastically different adult lives. Vivreki, accused of heresy in his youth, now fights to rescue and preserve the Swarm's eggs, while Asoori, a trained swordswoman, is sent to

retrieve the eggs for the Shemari priesthood. Both are being used as pawns by higher forces, even as they agonise over their own decisions.

Miller's strength lies in the vivid descriptions of her world's magic. The Swarms themselves are compelling figures, strange and beautiful, and in Miller's evocative physical descriptions of the world she's created, she occasionally summons up a true sense of wonder. However, the writing is also stylistically awkward, with frequently unconvincing dialogue. The thin characterisation makes it difficult to differentiate the large cast of characters in this book, or to care about their fates. For instance, Vivreki gathers a large band of followers around him, none of whom, apart from his brother, feel developed beyond a surface level. Any single one of these characters could have been erased from the book without significantly changing the plot, and even Vivreki's motivations are often hard to understand. This leads not only to lack of interest, but lack of conviction in major plot turns. It is to be hoped that, in the next book of the trilogy, the individual characters will be as compelling as the overarching story.

Stephanie Burgis



Following on from *Pandora's Star*, this is a door-stopping wedge of a space opera, clocking in at 949 pages. In this case, sheer size is proportionate to narrative scale, as humanity faces extinction at the hands of an alien race known as the Primes, with another alien, the Starflyer, lurking mysteriously in the background and perhaps manipulating events. Hamilton plots expertly, rushing the reader from one action sequence to another,

while constantly ramping up the spy-thriller-esque suspense and galactic political intrigue.

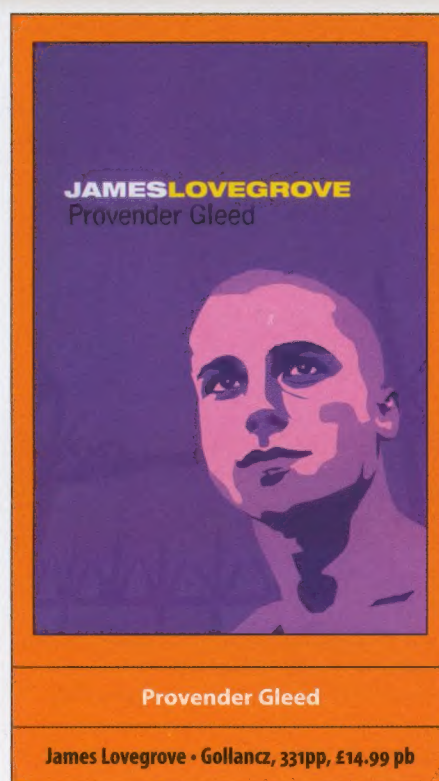
Across a wide range of lead characters, the recurrent question is one of whom to trust: just who is the Judas of the title, selling out humanity to its aggressors? Much tension is generated by multiple 'guess the enemy agent' sequences, and by the creeping sense that human identity can be corroded and impersonated by Starflyer mind-control technology.

Combining possession-horror, cyber-story and espionage thrills, Hamilton asks big moral questions. Foremost amongst these is whether genocide can ever be justified, or if being human means avoiding the destruction of another race. However, one major difficulty with this moralising remains that the Prime alien threat is such a 'black hat' villain – intent on cellular imperialism – that a degree of narrative complexity is lost. We are told that this marauding, evil species has no art, no fiction, and seemingly no redeeming features when compared to the human race's capacity for compassion and self-awareness. What could have been a magisterial exploration of the grey areas of war thus rather tumbles back into black-and-white brushstrokes.

Having said that, Hamilton's narrative does play creatively with the terrorist/freedom fighter distinction, showing how a group of terrorists opposed to the Starflyer – the Guardians of Selfhood – are eventually uneasily accepted as a part of the Commonwealth elite. Political and policing dogma have to be rethought as the Starflyer's existence is gradually confirmed, and as the Guardians move from being viewed as a dangerous bunch of conspiracy fanatics to becoming one potential source of humanity's salvation.

The worlds of *Judas Unchained* are variously populated by media stars, senators, scientists, socialist activists, family Dynasties, and corporate crusaders. Despite all this social and surface diversity, the odd disturbing pattern emerges. Whether Hamilton is paying tribute to the pulp roots of his genre is, of course, open to question, but his female characters are nevertheless often portrayed either as irresistible sexual goddesses, supportive concubines, or hard-bitten political types. The view of sexuality which drips through all of this seems, at best, reductive, and at worst, a caricature of a 13-year-old boy's stereotypical fears and fantasies. Maybe space opera isn't the place to look for fully-rounded characters, but when its themes involve representing and defending the essence of humanity, it's a touch ironic that the range of complex human feelings on show is somewhat curtailed. For me, *Judas Unchained* is, disappointingly, much more of a solid page-turner than a stellar thought-provoker, especially when compared to recent work by, say, Richard Morgan or Liz Williams.

Matt Hills



Like some of the characters within – those fortunate enough, for example, to receive an invitation to the Gleed Family's Annual Summer Ball – James Lovegrove's new novel wears its costumes and disguises with acuity, mischief and skill. What starts off as a contemporary comedy of manners, an observant but frankly obvious examination of the English class system, complete with snatches of deliberate caricature, soon morphs into something more dangerous and nourishing, while all the way through the trademark Lovegrovean quirks are easily and brilliantly visible.

Think money. The Gleds have plenty of it, being one of the most important Families on the planet. The party is afoot, but where is wifeless son Provender? Mother has gone as far as to ensure the presence of several suitable women, but the errant son – famed, almost, as much for his reluctance to participate in this world of the rich and famous as he is for his preordained, no-choice involvement with it – is nowhere to be found. When he *does* eventually emerge (after a good comic scene: drunk relative, arrival by parachute) he seems, the surly little bugger that he is (we are to think), to fancy one of the waitresses more than anyone that Mother has lined up to parade in front of him.

Is this it? I wondered at around this point, early on. As beautifully written as it had been, and as slippery with regards to form (the comedy of manners as a progress report on modern class tropes, all composed in the short, stabbing paragraphs of an old-school detective cracker), we had met the posh and we had met the less advantaged,

an association with the latter having been a reliable arrow in the direction that the first part of the novel would follow. Was this it? Disregarding the novel's one and only weak point of probability (why Provender would fall for a serving-girl whom he had met a few hours earlier), I foresaw the plot's trajectory: and, thankfully, got it spectacularly wrong. Good for James Lovegrove.

But why should I have been surprised? The author is, and always has been, remarkable in his skill for re-knitting every stitch of complacent guesswork that a reader makes on his and his work's behalf. Provender himself, for example, is a mixture of jumped-up pomposity, idle brattishness and common sense ("that didn't mean there weren't times when she thought he could do with a good hard smack," his mother opines, irrespective of the fact that the son is halfway through his twenties); and most of the principle characters show signs of deceptions – not least the aforementioned tray-carrier, Is (short for Isis), whose motives, as the book moves into its next genre, that of a warped kind of espionage thriller, become all too clear. She helps to kidnap him.

Think money, as I say. Then disregard the notion – or the motive. 'Families were not like ordinary folk,' granted; but there are grander plans underway than the simple extortion of moolah. The novel's principles, at this point, still, remain undefined. The blurring of forms remains wonderfully question-marked. Were it not for the very early scene – setting up Is's seduction of Provender – the reader might think that *Provender Gleed* is to be a variation on the Cinderella fairy tale, albeit told more from the Prince's point of view. It's not to be.

Who do you go to when your rich and important son is kidnapped? You go to the Anagrammatic Detectives. (Trust me on this: it works a treat.) It was at this point that I knew that Lovegrove had found his stride and was not even breathing heavily. To misappropriate an image from his earlier novel *Days*, I knew that the introduction of these Private Investigators would be the point from which the book would set sail. Everything had been leading to this: or to a departure *such* as this. The Anagrammatic Detectives take *Provender Gleed* away from anything that I'd read up until that point (although shadows of Newman and Ryman and Perec were fluttering). Here we were dropped into the heart of something truly fresh and original.

The Anagrammatic Detectives. Question: Is it existence that shapes the words that describe it; or words that shape the existence that follows? The detectives are squarely of the latter opinion: "...his name by itself isn't terrible productive, as you have just shown, but splice it together with his predicament..."

"As in?"

"As in PROVENDER GLEED STOLEN."

"And?"

"And you get confirmation that this was an outside job. You even get where he's being held and a clue to the identity of the person holding him."

And you do. And more besides. *Provender Gleed* shows, if more evidence was required, that James Lovegrove is one of the foremost novelists of his generation. His story-telling skill, and more importantly his knack of wrong-footing the reader are exemplars.

David Mathew

The Devil You Know

Poppy Z. Brite • Gauntlet Press, 173pp, \$14.95 pb

Apart from a handful of short stories, Poppy Z. Brite appears to have abandoned the vampire/dark fantasy/horror genre in which she rose to spectacular, if short-lived, prominence as a British Fantasy Award Best Newcomer in the early 1990s with novels *Lost Souls* and *Drawing Blood* and the collection, *Swamp Foetus*.

Bored with the now-clichés of New Orleans *voudun* and vampires, and suffering a long period between 1997 and 2000 of self-confessed 'writer's fatigue', Brite took time out to reinvent herself, to fall in love with John Kennedy O'Toole's absurdist New Orleans fantasy *A Confederacy of Dunces*, and fix on a new obsession, food and restaurants, the cooks and customers whose lives revolve round the preparation and consumption of good food, and form the axis to her recent novels *Liquor* and *Prime*.

The Devil You Know, Brite's third collection, charts this reinvention. It is both a retrospective and a restatement, with stories divided into two camps, pre- and post-*Liquor* and one straddling the divide, negotiating the space between them.

In the title story, inspired by an Alan Clark painting and Bulgakov's *The Master and Margherita*, the Devil and his familiar make an unexpected appearance on a carnival float. Three stories, 'O Death, Where is Thy Spatula?', 'Marisol' and 'The Heart of New Orleans' feature PZB in her alternate fictional existence as Dr Brite, New Orleans coroner and food junkie, and show just how far you might be prepared to go to satisfy your obsession and cravings.

'Lantern Marsh' is a version of one of Brite's earliest stories, a *Twilight Zone* competition 'Honourable Mention', reworked for the Halloween anthology *October Dreams*, in which form it reappears here. Featuring another of her isolated unworldly teenage protagonists, this has an almost Bradburyish feel.

'Pansu' forms a bridge between the early and later Brite stories. Another restaurant story, this is set in a downtown LA Korean diner run by Mr Oh, whose custom understandably suffers when his wife exhibits all the graphic

symptoms of an *Exorcist*-style possession.

'Bayou de la Mère' and the closing novella 'A Season in Heck' share characters and settings from *Liquor* (the name of the restaurant owned and run by the gay couple G-Man and Rickey). Overlapping with 'Heart of New Orleans', they mark the break from Brite's earlier work in that there is little overtly supernatural or horrific about them aside from the omnipresent, claustrophobic shadow of Catholic childhood, and the fear of loss or embarrassment, and of discovering who you are and how to fit in.

Steve Jeffery

War Surf

M.M. Buckner • Ace Books, 375pp, \$7.99 pb

M.M. Buckner is one of the new bright hopes of US SF. *War Surf* is her third novel, and examines a future Earth where capitalism has reached its most extreme possible outcome. Economic and environmental disaster has created an Orwellian world of 'protes' and executives, the classic worker-aristo schism.

The tale's narrator, Nasir Deepra, is a founding member of the executive class, two and a half centuries old, his body maintained by semi-autonomous nanotech. He and others of his class indulge in a sport called 'war surfing' to give their pampered lives some spice – this involves them dropping into regions of armed conflict between protes and corporate police, and getting footage of themselves in the thick of the action without getting arrested.

There are some great ideas being developed in this book, with themes of innocence and the ennui of excess underpinning. But the tale takes a long time to get going. Nearly a hundred pages pass before the indolent dilettantism of the War Surfers has been filled out, and only then do things start to get to the real meat of the story, which takes place on an orbital food manufactory that happens to be run by a company that Deepra controls. Stranded on said orbital, with his idealistic young masseuse and the crew of the manufactory, he is forced to confront the demons of his past, and the drives of his present, and to reconcile his lifestyle and philosophy with the unheeded outcomes of his actions on others.

The story seems constrained by the first person viewpoint; it is very hard to feel much sympathy toward Deepra in the early parts of the book, despite little hints toward skeletons in closets. At least true to character, Deepra's narration is very monomaniacal. This works very well in places, but makes other sections slow and difficult to read. The strengths lie more in strong symbolism and the vision, the ideas behind the story. It feels a lot less cinematic and action-based than a lot of work that current US writers are producing, and has a good moral sensibility behind it that mercifully steers well

clear of cloying sentiment or breast-beating. This is a promising piece by a journeyman author, and an interesting commentary on the possible future of unrestrained globalisation.

Paul Raven

Counting Heads

David Marusek • Tor, 336pp, \$24.95 hb

The definition of 'science fiction' is hotly debated. But the general consensus of the critics seems to be that it is defined by 'the encounter with otherness', and that despite (usually) being set in the future it is primarily a dialogue about Earth's present culture and our relationship with emerging technologies. If you accept these terms, David Marusek's novel-length debut *Counting Heads* is a bullseye on all counts. And not only that; he has managed to make the story a very human drama, filled with moments of touching humour and tragedy as the superbly realised characters move through the future world they inhabit. And what a world it is; simultaneously alien and yet hauntingly familiar, it is populated by 'iterant' clones, a desperate and marginalised 'working class' for whom work is a special privilege reserved for the fortunate, AI 'mentars' of awesome ability, rogue nanotech leftovers from 21st Century terror wars, and much, much more. The story's main thread follows Samson Harger, a prize-winning design artist in the mid-21st century, his engineered fall from grace and subsequent life of poverty and isolation, and the trials and tribulations of not just his original family, but that of the 'Charter' clade he ends up in. But the book burgeons with cunning subplots, all neatly interwoven into a tale of magnificent proportions. The language is rich, loaded with new words that hook the reader into wanting to know more within the first few pages. The gradual increase in pace is handled expertly, the last quarter of the book moving frantically towards the conclusion and pulling the reader firmly along with the plot, which unfolds so carefully that one is left constantly hungering for the next revelation. It creates two conflicting desires: the urge to hammer through as fast as possible and reach the finale, and the desire to savour every page, probing the text for the subtle nuances and details of the lushly imagined world Marusek has created. Not only is *Counting Heads* a thrilling read, a literal 'page-turner', but it is also a fantastic take on the technologies that lurk on our horizon today, a revelatory examination of our hopes and fears as related to these. Marusek's shorts created a great sense of anticipation about his first novel. It can be said with certainty that he has out-performed all expectations. This book will become a landmark of science fiction in the decade to come.

Paul Raven

INTERZONE 203

ON SALE IN MARCH

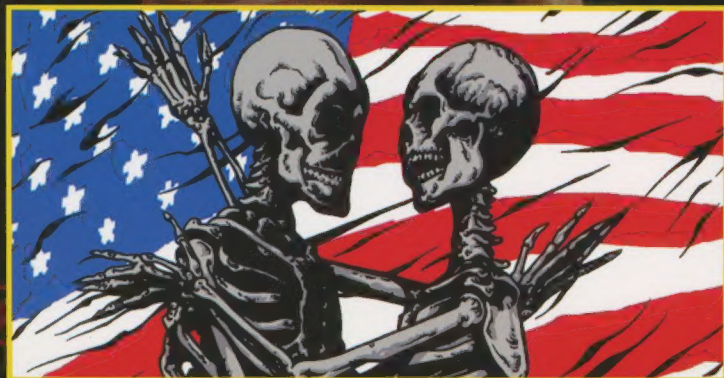
Don't miss issue 203 for the conclusion of Richard Calder's 'After the Party', Elizabeth Bear's 'Wane' (illustrated here by Ian Simmons), Karen D. Fishler's riveting novelette 'Among the Living' and Jay Lake's devastating 'The American Dead'. We also have a new alternate history by Sidewise Award winner Martin J. Gidron, some old favourites, some new favourites, and some soon to be favourites. We have completed, *in-depth* interviews with K.J. Bishop and Steve Erickson.

Keep checking the website and online discussion forum for updates: www.ttapress.com

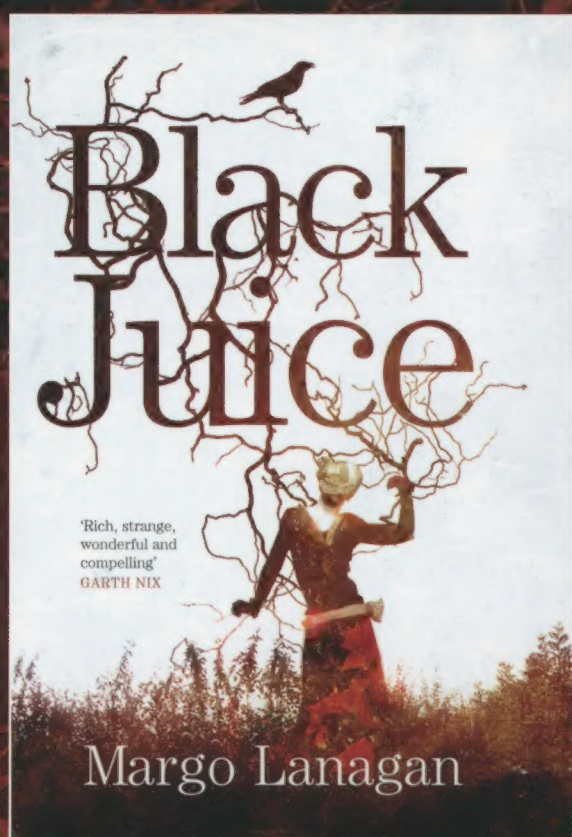


The American Dead is illustrated by Rik Rawling

K.J. Bishop is interviewed by Richard Calder



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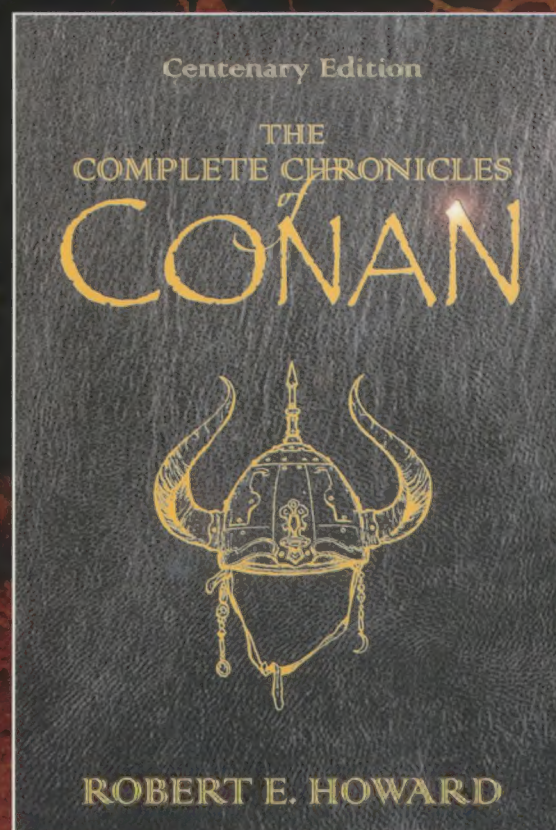
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